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Prologue

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"And you're sure she's the cat?"

A Starclan cat crouched next to the sunlit pond, her white pelt half-covered by enveloping, glowing green grass. Her starlit ears twitched in annoyance at the repeated question.

"Of course. We believe we have found the right cat this time. She's remarkable. She just-"

A third Starclan cat interrupted, their starry pelt swirled with stars that were dimly lit and faded. Their paws sent up less sparks as they moved, their apparatus less apparent among the pond's weeded edge.

"That's nonsense! This cat is part kittypet. She can't represent the clans," the cat's voice was condescending and scornful.

It was Ivyfall, Windclan's deceased deputy. Yet even as he spoke, his tail twitched- as if he knew that some cat would call him out soon.

"You just died recently, Ivyfall. Do not pretend to know a thing about Starclan's acceptances. After all, we've had legendary leaders both kittypets and rogues... Loners or tribe cats alike." Whiteleaf's voice was tinged with a growl as she spoke.

"And you dare doubt her for something her mother has done? She's Clanborn. So you're just *reaching* for an argument." Her green eyes and white pelt helped her spirit to glow even brighter, and her halo of white light seemed stronger than the others.

"So that's what we're making her? A leader as a kit?"

It was Rainstar who snapped this time, and on his own deputy at

that. "No, you hare-brain. We're going to wait until she reaches us, then give her an endowment. These cats don't want to repeat the same mistakes as last time." His thick grey fur bristled slightly, and Whiteleaf found herself hiding a chuckle.

If ever a cat admitted with their eyes that they dislike their deputy, it's Rainstar.

"Starclan is much cleverer than to throw nine lives away at first glance," the dark Windclan leader finished.

Whiteleaf nodded, agreeing with the newly-deceased leader.

"Oh, sure- but they aren't so smart about other things...." Many cats shot glares his way. Finally Ivyfall had the sense to stay quiet. But his tabby silvery-and-white tail still swished against the grass. With a breeze tugging their whiskers, the medicine cat bent closer to the circle of cats around her. The ferns shielded their group. Whiteleaf finally felt a sense of comfort and privacy settle beside the seeing-pool.

"The point is that Starclan fixes their mistakes, and looks to a brighter future. If we can do that, it'll prove that we've made the right choice this time." Some of the cats whispered behind her, until one blurted out, "but he was onto something; what right does a kittypet's kin have to save the clans? Why not a clan cat?"

Whiteleaf almost rolled her eyes. "Oh please," she sighed loudly, cranking up the volume of her mew to be heard. "This track has been tread time and time again!

She's perfect for the task. She's young enough to adapt to the casualties. She has the boldness of a maned lioness. You've seen it for yourself in the pool... The youngest cat we've witnessed yet to fight back against them."

The dead medicine cat pointed a white spirit-paw at the water below them, before peering back at the numerous cats crouching, standing or sitting in the grasses before her.

"And we do not choose perceievably extraordinary cats... just the

ones who can stand on all four paws with virtue, after all is said and done. So I feel *this* is the right choice." Many silver-lighted heads nodded in agreement, some with their ears sticking partway out of the ferns.

Dragonflies buzzed across the water behind them, skimming the cattails as they zigzagged adjacent to each other. The cats were quieter as the crickets began their symphony, a foreboding warning that night as well as death would fall upon the clans once more.

"Then what sign do we send? And to who?" Another Starclan cat called out, their black velvet ears twitching and sending stars swirling down their pelt and paws.

"Yes, it needs to be quick," Rainstar cut in, his cerulean eyes worried as he rose next to Whiteleaf. "Our medicine cat apprentice can't save the last injured warriors by himself! What if there's an attack while-"

Some cat yowled from the audience, and Rainstar's frantic words were cut off. Shadows were pooling beaneth the oak and maple trees, deepening underneath a pelt of orange light.

"I'm afraid Windclan is already wiped out," Whiteleaf stated calmly, knowing that half the time, she hardly remembered her own clan of origin. She found it hard to care as much as other cats did.

"Then we must restore my clan!" Rainstar demanded.

Whiteleaf knew that all of the clans were equal and different from each other in nothing more than culture and environment. Otherwise, they were all groups with equal needs; yet the want to express themselves as individual arose each time. It was always Riverclan, Thunderclan, Shadowclan- "*my clan."* But never "the clans" or "our clans."

"One thing at a time. All of the clans are suffering," Whiteleaf chided.

The cats among the grasses sat beneath now-appearing stars. A thick belt of them swathed one particular area of pastel-violet starlit

sky.

Whiteleaf loved that about this place. Somehow the stars were brighter and closer to the earth than they ever had been in life.

"No, we shouldn't send a sign." She went on before Rainstar could argue.

"Her fiery spirit will send her to us soon enough, no matter the danger. She will be in this alone, I fear- save for a few friends along the way, if they survive." Of this, Whiteleaf's ancient mind was completely confident.

"So what's stopping this so-called-special cat from dying first?" one of Starclan's warriors called flatly, and many turned their necks around to try and tell which had said it.

The comment was jarring, and the medicine cat felt a stirring of crossness because of it. She flicked her tail and remained where she sat, simmering. The forlorn she-cat then turned back towards the pool.

"Clearly you did not hear me when I said no cat is special."

*Young fallen warriors are so full of it these days. Always bitter about their own stolen time. "*Nothing but expectation. Same old, same old. We shall see if she lives." She gritted her teeth, and then let the anger go, as easily as water sliding down into a rocky pool.

I have a feeling she will. If only they had let me have a say last time, they'd know. She-cats intuition knows best... The starry figure blinked her tired eyes.

Sometimes prophecies aren't always right.

Beneath that tree, she calmly stayed, watching the ripples of water as they formed a foggy but forming mirror-view into the Warrior's living world.

Whiteleaf

Allegiances

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(Photos are vague representations not exact markings.)

*(*There will be **artwork** or **photo representations** above or below each chapter*)*

Riverclan

Leader: Eveningstar- Brown Tabby-and-white she-cat with forest-green eyes

Deputy: Smallsparrow- small reddish orange-and-white male cat

Medicine Cat: Goldenheart- golden she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:
(Senior) Chaosclaw- copper brown tomcat with darker ears
Apprentice, Tidepaw- black-and-white tom with striking navy-blue eyes

Everfrost- black tabby-and-white blue-eyed tom

Vixeneyes-torbie she-cat with large green eyes and dainty white paws

Berrybright- white tom with dark amber eyes and a pink nose

Alpinefog- cloudy grey tom-cat
Apprentice, Rowanpaw- chestnut-brown furred she-cat with darker

ears, a lighter muzzle and light yellow eyes

(Junior) Raccoonstripe- orange-eyed grey tabby tomcat with thicker black stripes around the eyes and a short ringed tail

Aquasplash- grey-and-white short-furred she-cat with pale green eyes
Apprentice, Crescentpaw- yellow-and-blue eyed (See end of Chapter 5 about this character's Heterochromia) black-and-white tabby she-cat with a streak of white on the face resembling a crescent moon or curved clawmark

Lagoonstripe- silver-grey tabby she-cat with long legs and pale green eyes

Houndspots- short-furred brown and white tomcat
Apprentice,Tinypaw- shiny black she-cat with small paws and indigo eyes.

Quietdew- dark grey-and-white she-cat

Emberfawn- small reddish-ginger tom with a dark brown stripe along his back

Honeypatch- yellow-and-white patched tomcat

Elders:
DrenchedLeaf- grey female tabby with unkempt fur

Thunderclan

Leader: Antlerstar- dusty brown tabby tom

Deputy: Thunderblaze- orange tabby tomcat with a zigzagged flash of white on his chest

Medicine Cat: Cirruspelt-Brown-And Black tortishell male cat
Fireflyfur-

Warriors:
Flamewind- spiraled-orange male tom-cat

Squirrelchase- cream she-cat with a darker orange-ish tail

Apprentices:
Trufflepaw- short-coated brown tomcat with blue eyes

Garlicpaw- cream tom with a fluffy tail and bush ear-tips

Elders:
Littlecherry- calico she-cat with sparsely any white

Skyclan

Leader: Jadestar- green-eyed grey-and-orange dilute calico she-cat

Deputy: Cinderpatch-white tomcat with large blue-grey patches

Medicine Cat: Hillflower- brown-tabby and white she-cat with amber eyes

Warriors:
Sootface- dark grey tomcat with a smoky black face and tail (amber-eyed)

Apprentices: Rainpaw- blue-gray she-cat with green eyes

Queens:
Pepperpelt- silver-grey speckled she-cat with blue eyes

Kits:
Oatkit- yellow-eyed pale orange tabby tomkit with faded stripes and a white-tipped tailtip

Cloverkit- black-and-white she-kit with dipped-in-mud fur appearance

Shadowclan

Leader: Gravelstar- black tortoiseshell tomcat with grey eyes

Deputy: Darkflower- narrow-eyed dark grey she-cat

Medicine Cat: Elmshade- brown tabby tomcat

Warriors:
Nighthowl- large black-and-silver tom with a white muzzle and paws, and yellow eyes

Apprentice, Velvetpaw- smoky grey even-haired she-cat with amber-orange eyes

Apprentice, Wolfpaw- grey-and-white tom with fluffy fur

Elders:
Plumetail- white long-furred she-cat with an orange feathery tail

Windclan:

Leader: Rainstar- thick-furred grey tomcat with striking blue eyes and large paws

Deputy: Ivyfall- grey tabby tomcat with white paws

Medicine Cat: Silverdrop- silver swirled tabby she-cat with white teardrop markings around the eyes
Apprentice, Polarpaw- white tomcat with grey paws

Warriors:
(Senior) Sunrunner- sandy pelted tall she-cat
Apprentice, Stalkpaw

Redpatch- red-and-white male cat with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Ryepaw- wheat-colored pale sandy she-cat with a white marking on her muzzle

Queens: Briarsting- pregnant she-cat

Kittypets:

Caracal- tall, thick-haunched spotted she-cat with yellow eyes and a brown spotted pelt

Cheetah- green-eyed sandy golden spotted she-cat with large round ears

Maps and Timeline:

The (Updated Map) Lake Territories in modern clans AU. The clans still have the updated warrior code and their own legends, but Firestar never existed.

Green-Windclan
Pink- Shadowclan
Blue- Riverclan
Yellow- Thunderclan
Orange- Skyclan

1 🌙

[image]

🌗4 Moons Old🌗

Crescentkit, Tinykit, Rowankit

Lain in a nest against the nursery wall, a kit raised her head, black ears twitching. A curdling wail was echoing from beyond the shelter's tightly-woven entrance.

Her sisters and mother-cat rose immediately. It wasn't long before Crescentkit, too, was pushed from the den. Usually her fur would've been on end. And yet she was growing accustomed to the ritual, which occurred within the Clan at least twice a week since before she had been born.

The wolves came to hunt during the still shadowed blanket of the night, or the reddening dying-sun of twilight just before. They never left without at least one cat injured or culled.

The predators feasted on their remains, and the Clans senior warriors or elders would do the duty of burying what was left.

Clan abandonment had been a serious discussion, but no cat wanted to admit defeat and flee without the agreement of the other clans. Alone and without Starclan's guidance, the loyalest of Riverclan cats had stayed through the butchery. But it felt like an island lined with despair and loss rather than reeds and streams. Their camp no longer felt protected.

Without knowing it Crescentkit had been sheilded from most of that. Just like now, her mother was covering her eyes from Riverclan's reeded clearing with a bi-colored calico haunch. The fluffy she-kit kept moving forward, following Vixeneye until their

small family was backed by the other cats preceding them.

Quietdew, a middle-aged Riverclan warrior, was ahead of them and on Goldenheart's heels. Both she-cats were fighting to be the first in the cleft in the rock, a narrow safe-haven facing the dirtplace tunnel's bramble walls; where a wolf could scarcely reach the area to snatch or bite at a cat.

Vixeneye swiveled around and mewed urgently to her kits "Nevermind. Into the trees!"

Rowankit, Tinykit, and Crescentkit all pricked their ears and hurried after her. Rowankit ran ahead, hardly glancing back while Crescentkit waited on their smaller sister. Tinykit loped into a stubby-legged run alongside her shoulder. The kitten's thin black tail was spiked up like holly leaves.

Bright green duckweed grew in clumps at the foot of a river birch beside the leader's den. The kits padded through it, taking turns as first Rowankit and then Crescentkit leaped onto the birch's vertical trunk, tiny kitten claws sinking in.

Crescentkit's thick tabby tail lashed as she fought to hold onto the chipping-off bark. They could hear snarls from just beyond the dark foilage of the camp walls where the posted guards were being attacked. The night air was thick with tension as the sounds subsided.

Rowankit glanced down at her and Tinykit, then stuck out a russet hindpaw in an attempt to dislodge them.

"Hey!" Tinykit protested, aiming her shrill cry down at their mother. Vixeneye had no consequence to give, however. Her ears were flattened and her eyes wide as she swarmed up the tree, halting just beneath them with a huff.

"Hurry up!" The Riverclan queen snapped with fear. Her yellow gaze flashed in the trees black swathe of shadow. Oblivious crickets sang amongst the riverbed reed grasses below them. The moon was only a claw-scratch tonight, providing almost no light against the bark of the tree they were climbing.

Impatiently, Vixeneye clawed upward and nipped Tinykit by the scruff before passing her other two kits. She climbed higher paw-step by paw-step, reaching a cleft in the trunk above them.

Crescentkit began to hear the sound of heavy thumping paw-steps as wolves swept into camp underneath her. Their panting mouths showed glinting white teeth and lolling pink tongues. Their canines flashed like pearl daggers in the moonlight. The wolves eyes were cunning and pinpointed, set deep into the grooves of their long tapered faces.

She kept climbing behind Rowankit. The tabby-and-white she-kit felt safe up on the tree, and huffed with determination as she almost overtook her chestnut-furred sister.

Rowankit turned her head and glared over at Crescentkit with baleful yellow eyes. There was a sardonic frown on her face, which made her kin scrunch her nose with confusion. She watched her cinnamon-brown sister unhook a paw.

Rowankit flicked one of her forepaws underneath her own front two, fully dislodging the sunk-in claws with a forceful swipe. Instantly Crescentkit fell backwards and somersaulted towards the ground. The tree scraped her forehead on the way down, as wind hit her stomach and backside, and the world span in circles until she righted herself. The tabby kit rose again soon after landing on her paws, turning as she heard guttural snarling in her ears.

"Get back up the tree!" Eveningstar yowled from somewhere in the camp, but she was already bushing her tail out, unsheathing her claws, and craning her neck around the other warriors. They were swarming over the wolf's grey-furred back and neck.

The animal had broad shoulders and a long body. Its back was slightly darker than its pale underbelly. Its eyes flicked to and fro from each attacking cat as it nipped and bared its fangs in reaction. Crescentkit saw its dark red gums and wet white teeth gleam beneath the sliver of moonlight. The animal towered over the frozen grasses swathing the cat's shoulders, twisting and snarling just a few strides from the nursery entrance. Its head alone was as large as their largest warriors.

A ragged-furred cat burst from the elders den and hurled across the clearing. She attempted to climb the closest tree. But another wolf, stark and grey against the heaps of snow, stopped fighting the warriors and turned to reach for Drenchedleaf. Its breath billowed in clouds as it breathed, barreling forward with warriors falling off behind it.

Drenchedleaf wailed as she was pulled back by the wolf, but Crescentkit was already hurtling forward. The sub-freezing wind tugged her ears back as she moved, stepping around one cat and then another, dashing up to the frozen tree roots where Drenchedleaf feebly struggled.

The wolf's head was larger than her entire body. Hissing, the black tabby-and-white kitten drew back a tiny unfurled paw and scratched at its eye socket. When the wolf flinched but didn't stop its snapping down on Drenchedleaf's head Crescentkit braced her back paws and leaped onto its face.

She used her tiny kit-claws to pummel. But she soon realized she was doing no real damage to the skin beneath a wolf's brazen fur. As the huge animal began flicking its head back, it released Drenchedleaf to try and tear Crescentkit off.

2 🌙

[image] [image]

◯ 4 moons old ◯

Paws crunched against dead leaves and snow as a hefty black tabby-and-white tom slammed his hindquarters against the earth, running and pouncing at the wolf's throat. His paws were flung out mercilessly, and his jaws found purchase against the soft part of the wolves neck, right below the chin with fangs planted among the jugular. His claws fastened just beside with expert placement- and although the wolf didn't fall, it twitched with pain and cringed away.

Crescentkit dropped to the ground as Everfrost, both a senior warrior and her father, paused from his spitting attack on the wolf.

"Get up that tree, quick!" His mew turned into a hard growl as he saw his daughter begin to advance once again, intending to help him.

The wolf lifted a front paw to swivel towards Eveningstar. The thick-furred she-cat had her claws sank into its back tendons. As the animal flung Everfrost away his black-and-white pelt skidded into a heap of nearby reeds.

Crescentkit, heart pounding but not with fear, stared after her father before moving.

She was aware that Drenchedleaf, Riverclan's last elder, was dying close by. The tabby she-cat's screams of bloody agony filled her ears. The she-kit turned to fight once again, until she was knocked into and then flanked by her revived father.

"Get into the tree."

"How many wolves are there tonight?" The kit glimpsed two still attacking the clan cats, and a third eating the bodies of those

already fallen. Berrybright was among them, an impatient and outspoken warrior that Crescentkit had liked. But she couldn't bear to look at the tom's mangled heap for any longer.

Chaosclaw and Eveningstar were now fighting together, but the others were out of sight- hopefully up a tree or at least deep inside of their thorny dens.

Echofrost ignored her question, steering her towards the tree and mewing urgently in her ear while bending down to try and block her view. "You can't fight with us yet Crescentkit. Let the warriors take care of it."

Hot rebellion choked her throat until she almost rebuked against her father's words. Drenchedleaf gave a feeble wail. Everfrost turned away to assist the other cats abruptly. His black-and-white tail was spiked with nerves, despite how calm his voice had been.

Crescentkit impatiently climbed the tree and sat with her sisters and mother-cat, giving Rowankit a sour look. *I wonder if I could get away with throwing her off in return.*

It wasn't very much longer that she looked back down at the Riverclan camp below them, edged with tall reeds and river birches. Most of the shrubs had been trampled or torn out, so that the den wall was crushed or sagging in places. Snow sagged all of the sparse foliage down. Everything was encrusted with frost, even the tree-bark beneath her.

Drenchedleaf wasn't the last to die that night. One of the wolves lifted her body in its jaws and trotted back to its territory, with the second following soon after it finished eating Berrybright. Crescentkit didn't know how wolf clans worked, but she figured that one might've had a litter of wolf-kits back at camp and was going to feed Drenchedleaf to them. The fluffy she-kit wished the elder a quick passage to Starclan.

She could hear the last wolf still snarling and growling at the edge of the clearing, but its movements were confined by part of the warriors den. Her fur pricked with foreboding as her ears searched the churned-up earth for her father's sleek black-and-white

shoulders. She first saw Eveningstar's fallen body, close to the skirmish between three remaining warriors and one wolf.

Their leader was losing a life. She saw the barbarity of the neck wound, then looked away to continue searching for her father, stomach churning. It was a moment before she saw his backside as the fighting warriors moved more into view. Everfrost dodged the wolf's snapping bite to his face, and his kin's responding gasps were distraught. Tinykit jumped up from leaning against her shoulder.

"Everfrost!" Crescentkit wailed as Vixeneye trembled behind them on the frozen tree-trunk. Her mother's sides shook harder, shaking the branch beneath their paws. As her eyes followed her kit's gaze to the sagging body that was still partly upright, her mouth fell slack with alarm.

The animal was standing over him, twice-doubling the warrior's height and then some. The tufted senior warrior spat blood onto the white earth, but held the wolf's gaze with a glare. Then, he turned, his paws faltering as he wobbled slightly; stumbling against the frozen earth. Everfrost seemed to be retreating, but his backend was immediately seized in the wolf's jaws before he was shaken agressively. More blood spewed from her father's mouth, until the wolf finished killing him and began trodding away.

The wolf didn't even care that he gave up. It also didn't react to the cats scratching and biting its hindquarters, yowling and chasing it out of camp. Crescentkit felt a dreadful hollowness in her throat, and her eyes stung with rage and sorrow. Her claws popped out and sunk deep into the bark, as Riverclan's icy stream-bordered camp blurred beneath her.

I will never allow this to happen to someone I love ever, ever again.

The remaining cats in the dim sliver of light were deafeningly silent for awhile. Riverclan cats clinging to adjacent tree branches were looking across at Vixeneye with sympathy; or not looking at all. Her mother gave wracking half-sobs behind her, ragged breaths the only thing giving her grief away.

———————

3 🌙

[image][image]

○❍◑◕●◕◐◯ ***11.5 moons old***

Crescentpaw watched Goldenheart and Eveningstar talking beside the fresh-kill pile. Her dual-colored eyes slitted with focus as she leaned towards her littermates.

"I mean, she could *technically* do it now. We're almost twelve moons old anyways... why wait?" She almost got up to go and ask her, but was stopped by Tinypaw's outstretched foreleg.

"Wait! It isn't much longer anyways, Crescentpaw." The she-cat's black pelt twitched along her spine nervously.

"And you can't go interrupting the leader like that," Rowanpaw stated, much harsher in her tones.

Crescentpaw shot her a look but her sister was already stalking towards the fresh-kill pile.

"I'm going to find out what they're talking about." Rowanpaw threw her words behind her without looking back.

Less confident Crescentpaw followed. She raised her tail and tried to look nocholont beneath the cloudy sky. As Tinypaw trailed behind, she earned no more than a glance from the other cats in camp.

Tidepaw was already at the fresh-kill pile. He met her gaze as she bent down to seek out a small fish, and Crescentpaw was unusually caught off guard.

I don't know what to say about his mentor... Feeling uncharacteristically awkward, she avoided eye contact but sat nearby so she didn't seem like she was avoiding the black-and-white

tom.

Tidepaw's mentor Chaosclaw had died to a wolf attack three nights ago. He'd been one of their last remaining senior warriors. And pitying herself for it, Crescentpaw was ashamed to admit that she'd hardly knew him. She stepped back from the pile with a trout seized in her jaws, which reeked of fish in a tantalizing way.

Some of the cats had fled the clans to be rogues, loners, or kittypets. A few had even tried switching clans in favor of the territory least plagued by wolves, but it'd proved to be futile. They were all over the lake.

The different-colored irises of her eyes glinted beneath the morning sun while Crescentpaw settled next to Tinypaw. She began eating her prey and decided to follow Tinypaw's lead, who was not partaking in Rowanpaw's tilted head-turn towards the whispering she-cats. While picking flesh from the fish spine, the apprentice thought about her kithood, and her mother's abrupt absence.

Vixeneye had left them after they'd been named apprentices. The seasoned warrior had flitted off to the kittypet life. She hadn't even told them that she was doing it.

There used to be just the threat of occasional badgers, foxes, and Twolegs. But now it was mostly wolves. Oddly enough, the wolves never seemed to approach the Twolegs; and their scent trails never overlapped one another's. So clearly the wolves had no desire to hunt Twolegs, or foxes, or whatever else they could find more of beyond Clan boundaries.

They preferred their current food source of the cats themselves. And so Vixeneye had become so terrified that she'd run off to a Twoleg.

Either way, she could've taken us with her. She could've asked if we had wanted that. If we- If I-... Her whiskers stiffened. She knew what it was. *We should've been given the choice.*

"Okay, I'll leave for the Moonpool now." Goldenheart's mew was finally heard over their crunching of prey bones. Eveningstar whisked her thick brown tabby tail, clearly pleased. There were

several scars along the leader's pelt, but the most prominent were along her back and face.

"Excellent. If ever we needed Starclan, it's now. It's been so long..." At first, she didn't try to hide her grievous mew. But when she glanced over at the watching apprentices, her voice dropped again.

"I'm sorry we can't spare any warriors." She sighed and stepped closer to the golden-furred medicine cat.

"If we could even spare an apprentice, I would..." Eveningstar's voice was barely more than a whisper, but Crescentpaw found herself pricking her ears to catch her words. The low-lying widespread trees rocked gently above them, as the wind picked up in the early day.

Past the stream running along the edge of camp, Crescentpaw could hear squirrels chittering in the willows, and begging to be caught in mid new-leaf. But she was listening close to Eveningstar.

Eveningstar is such a good leader. She might be impatient at times but it's always for the good of the clan. Crescentpaw had never known another Riverclan leader in her short life. And in fact, she didn't want to. She admired the brazen thick-furred she-cat.

Eveningstar had never taken a mate or had kits. She had committed herself to her clan- and that's exactly what Crescentpaw was shooting for. *With my own twist on things of course. I would've went to the Moonpool myself, especially with nine lives.*

Then she realized she was talking out of her ears. Eveningstar could be on her last life now, and was also probably worried about protecting what remained of their tiny clan. Plus medicine cats always had a stronger ability to communicate with Starclan cats.

"Travel safe," the leader gave a slightly-regretful sigh, but it also seemed one of relief. Crescentpaw thought she heard Eveningstar add "Stay alive," but she wasn't completely certain.

The green-eyed she-cat then turned her head to acknowledge the clan's remaining apprentices.

"Your mentors will return from the dawn patrol soon. Until then, stay in the camp. I'm going to check on them, and hunt on the way back." Eveningstar looked pointedly at the fresh-kill pile that they had devoured, with only two minnows left on it. However her gaze wasn't stern; and she padded away without saying more.

"Oh- and Tidepaw." The leader focused her gaze on the younger black-and-white apprentice.

"I suppose I'll be your new mentor for the time being."

Eveningstar didn't need to say more. All the cats knew that it was because every warrior in camp was either injured and healing, or already dead and fled the Clans.

It almost felt normal to Crescentpaw, since it's all she had ever known. However; she wasn't a fluff-brain. She knew something had to be done, and her thoughts constantly raced to find a solution.

But they all seemed short-sighted. Stuff like, find some kittypets or rogues to join the clans, or something. *But couldn't that cause more problems than it would help?* And then Crescentpaw found herself second guessing everything, and she gave up on thinking of solutions.

What can one cat do anyways? It's not like I'm *super significant. Or hyper-intelligent. Or strong.*

As her peers began chattering in Eveningstar's absence, she flicked her tail and wrapped it around herself. *But you know what? I don't need to be anything special to make a difference.*

4

[image]
[image]

"Ugh. Tidepaw will get his warrior name before us now, since he's being trained by the leader and all of our mentors will die before she does."

Rowanpaw's targeted comment was jagged, and cut through the tense air like a claw-stab. Paying attention now, Crescentpaw pricked her ears and prepared to cut in.

"Ignore her," Tinypaw said. "We're all just afraid that appointing us warriors is the least of Eveningstar's concerns right now." She sighed, not hiding her misgivings but halting the confrontation.

Tidepaw nodded and agreed. He was tall for his age, with thin legs and a tiny black nose. The tom looked very similar to his mother Bristleberry, who had died from a wolf slaughter at night several moons ago. Tidepaw had just been a kit back then, the same as them.

"You're right." Crescentpaw noticed how he didn't even spare Rowanpaw a look, which caused her brown-furred sister to curl her lip. "The wolves have been coming more often, I think." He tilted his chin up in thought. "Do you think they're hunting the other clans to this extent as well? Or could they have camped close by to target Riverclan as a prey source?"

Tidepaw's tail bushed worriedly while he slid his claws out against the clovers. Swiveling her head towards the warriors den, Crescentpaw glanced towards its woven reed fronds. Through the opening she could see no cats inside. They must've all been in the medicine den, where Goldenheart had left them to go on her trip to the Moonpool.

"The other clans are probably still suffering as well, but there's no

telling how badly." The tabby-and-white apprentice almost hoped it was true. That way it wasn't Riverclan alone that would find the situation dire enough to act.

"In order to find any news we'd have to get to a gathering or the other clan territories." She stretched out her long blazen tail to let the breeze catch and tug at it while she said so.

"And Drenchedleaf said that the gathering's were paused many moons ago. It was agreed to by all five clans to prevent wolf attacks along the lakeshore."

Rowanpaw wasn't arguing with that. They all knew that the wolf attacks were most prominent after nightfall, because it was when the wolves preferred to hunt.

Thinking of Drenchedleaf made Crescentpaw turn her face away. She still remembered how she had been yet again shielded by her parent's haunches. Now they weren't here to shield her anymore. *One by choice, one by death.* In the end, she had lost them both.

"I wish the wolves had never come at all," Tinypaw mewed quietly. She hardly ever spoke her opinion in groups, so all of the cats mewed in open agreement. "I miss Echofrost. He always made me feel better when-"

"You sound like a kit," Rowanpaw interrupted, straightening up and throwing a condescending glance down at her sleek black-pelted sister. Tinypaw was much smaller, and so the look was appropriate.

But it still made Crescentpaw's blood boil.

"He's our father!" She snapped, easily looking down at her just like Rowanpaw had done to Tinypaw.

"And we're going to be warriors in less than a moon! So start acting like one," the crescent-marked apprentice's voice held the hint of a snarl in it. *Great Starclan! I don't hate her, but she really rubs my fur the wrong way sometimes!*

"Me?" Rowanpaw sounded full of mock-pity now. "That's what I just told *her!* What are you, slow?"

Crescentpaw stood up and unsheathed her claws. It was just a warning, of course, but she lifted a brow with surprise when Rowanpaw did the same.

Clear-white clawtips glinted in the sun, bright against the trampled emerald grasses of the main path to the freshkill pile. The sisters huffed and lashed their tails, staring each other down with narrowed eyes.

"Oh, stop it, you lot! You're sisters and you can't even remotely get along? I'd *kill* to have any of my siblings alive," Tidepaw lectured, his sharp azure gaze pinpointed on them. The tom's criss-crossed face was set in a grimace as he condoned them.

The black-and-dark grey tabby fur across her spine was still bristling, but Tidepaw had cut off her swipe with that jolting comment. Then, he went ahead and made another one.

"It must be your *kittypet* mother. You have no sense of kin or clan."

Crescentpaw's eye began practically *twitching* at hearing that heinous insult.

"Say that word *again*," she smiled as she swiveled around on her back paws, stooping over Tidepaw on her tippy-toes as best she could. The apprentice was older than her, but even with a few scars, and clearly being of warrior age- he wasn't all that intimidating.

Tidepaw blinked calmly, as if he felt unthreatened. The lack of a reaction only fueled Crescentpaw's annoyance further, so she shoved into him with her shoulder roughly.

Tidepaw wasn't goated. Instead, he flicked his ears and opened his mouth to let out another stinging retort.

"I said you-"

Crescentpaw cut off his words with a hiss, shoving into his face with her tail lashing. She wondered if it would be worth it, attacking Tidepaw regardless of the consequences her mentor would bestow upon her. Being mere centimeters from those mocking blue

eyes, she felt it might be worth it.

"Stop that at once! Crescentpaw, back away from Tidepaw. And Tidepaw, don't you ebb us on like that. She left the clan after we were born; she wasn't a kittypet *before*. That makes us clan-born." Tinypaw lectured them crossly.

"You know very well that our mother's morals aren't our own. And deep down, what did she do- besides be too scared to save her clan?"

"She *left*," Tidepaw said it so fast, before Tinypaw had even finished- that Crescentpaw figured he must've had that response saved up for awhile now.

"She left her kin and clan to die, she left against her leader's word, she didn't give a rat's back-end for the warrior code. Your mother was a coward!" He practically barked, snapping his teeth.

"At least my family didn't leave. They..." Tidepaw didn't finish. His chest was heaving with anger and sadness and confusion all at the same time. And Crescentpaw knew what he had meant to say next.

She scooted a bit closer to the tom, intending to sympathize. *I understand where the anger and accusations are coming from now*. But Rowanpaw reacted first.

"A lot of cats left," The reddish-brown she-cat growled as the ferns swished behind her, the wind picking up and stirring the sparse debris among the clearing. As a stray piece of moss slid across the ground between her and Tidepaw, she reluctantly stepped back. At least for now, she felt that he would only respond to her comfort with more defensiveness.

"Including your oldest littermate. Shywish, wasn't it?"

Ouch. Especially when Rowanpaw talks to him like that! Although a tiny part of her knew that she hadn't been any better just a few minutes ago.

The silence was heavy after that, and Tidepaw's tail-tip began twitching as he fought to control his reply. Then, seemingly

thinking better of it, the black and white tom flung open his jowels once again. His blue eyes were glaring as he spoke to the three sisters.

"Yeah, but she didn't leave her kits behind! Her kits *died*, before she even had the choice to take them with her!" He spat.

Crescentpaw just stifled a sigh, exchanging a stressed glance with Tinypaw. Her sister's mild violet gaze said *Just don't say anything. We all know he's grasping at strings.*

"My mother was a coward, I'll admit it," Rowanpaw sighed and gazed over at Tidepaw forlornly. As if she wanted him to in turn, somewhat agree with her.

Oh, brother. Why can't Rowanpaw ever keep her mouth shut? The topic was tense already, barely teetering on the top of a mountaintop before it fell crashing down one slope or the other.

"Any cat who fled the clans is a traitor. I hope they never come back. My mother included," she said conversationally, swishing her long copper tail over the gritty earth beneath their paws.

Before Tidepaw could answer they heard pawsteps beyond the tattered camp wall. Crescentpaw saw their mentors returning from the dawn patrol through the thorny gaps.

"Since you're all awake, I hope you guys are ready to go back out for hunting. We found some prey on the way back, but it wasn't much." Tidepaw rose and was the first to greet the mentors as they padded through, then halted beside the freshkill pile.

"I am," Rowanpaw interjected, taking a mouse from Alpinefog before he had even dropped it. Crescentpaw exhaled, grateful that the argument was over for now. She didn't want to accidentally scratch any cat's ears.

Aquasplash approached her with a large carp, and Crescentpaw shook her head.

"I've already eaten, but thanks. Just put it on the prey-pile." The apprentice's swirly tabby pelt fluttered in the wind as she lifted her

tail.

"Well, alright. We can get a head start on land-prey hunting while the others finish. You need to touch up on that. Come along," Aquasplash said as she turned and headed back out of camp, expecting Crescentpaw to follow.

Before she fully exited, she tossed a look over at the empty Medicine Cat and Elder's den.

I hope Goldenheart comes back soon with good news. Not having anymore elders isn't a good sign. And Chaosclaw was the last senior warrior we had left.

Over the course of her life Crescentpaw had seen her father and other clanmates slain by the wolves. And now there were only four apprentices in Riverclan- with only a few meek paw-fulls of warriors left.

The clan won't survive like this, and we can't even discuss what to do about it because the Gatherings are still put on hold.

The Clan cats couldn't access the island because at night was when the wolves attacked most prominently. Most of the time they hunted in small groups or throngs. There was, of course, evenings when none of the predators came at all. But Crescentpaw could only assume that's because they were raiding out the other camps.

They kill us for food. And it's strange, because.. I don't think warriors have ever been prey. Not for this long, at least. Not to the brink of extinction.

With her heart clenched with anxiety for her clan, Crescentpaw followed her mentor out of camp.

Rowanpaw

5 🌙

[image] [image] [image]

That night the apprentices were ushered up a tree by Tinypaw's mentor, Houndspots, while Eveningstar and other warriors defended the camp. Riverclan had decided many moons ago, nearly at the start of this onslaught, not to let younger apprentices fight against the wolves. And so Crescentpaw watched with profound disbelief as one wolf branched off, and their leader was cornered into fighting alone. Just like her father had been.

Cornered against a conjoined edge of camp wall, the two animals were nearly completely submerged in shadow. More foilage grew along the camp boundary and overgrown sedge. in Greenleaf it grew in clumps that stretched above the cat's ears in some places. Therefore no one on the ground seemed to notice when she was struck down. The wolf gripped her by the throat; as if she were a mouse- and just like that, Eveningstar went limp like prey.

Soon after, cats started to notice. The warriors wailed and abandoned their defense, swarming up the trees as Eveningstar was ripped apart below.

Despite her half-eaten, bloodied and mangled body, every cat expected her to wake up. And... when she didn't; their anxiety was profound. The survivors in the clan mourned, not knowing what to do without their medicine cat or leader. Eveningstar had been their beloved Star, the only guidance that the clan had left.

"We must recover from this attack. We will sit vigil for Eveningstar tonight... Even without her body." Smallsparrow, the clan deputy, was the first to take charge. The cats around him dissociated, hardly saying a word as they recalled the horrible remains that they could not present for the vigil. Eveningstar's intensities had been strewn out several feet from her torn-open belly; half-chewed into bits. The blood staining that corner of camp was still wet and gleaming against the night grass.

"Tomorrow after Eveningstar's burial we will discuss our options." They had wrapped her in torn-up grass and thick swathes of moss, which were partly blood-soaked. Some cats had retrieved shells from in front of the dens, placing them atop her covered corpse.

But soon after, several cats argued. "Did anyone know she was on her last life?" Emberfawn called, his yellow eyes fiery against the shadow-swamped vegetation. He crouched there with his chest pressed against the peaty earth.

"What are we supposed to do now?"

"If Goldenheart doesn't come back then can we even call ourselves a clan anymore? Smallsparrow will have to become leader, and we'll need to appoint another medicine cat by the will of Starclan!" Some other cat yowled in distress.

"Hush. Tomorrow," the Clan deputy murmured, his deep mew sounding tired and resound. Then the cats gathered around a bare patch of earth in the center of camp that had been previously cleared for greenleaf mourning rituals.

Although they could not bear to grieve with Eveningstar's destroyed, half-consumed corpse, the cats stayed in the clearing across the camp from her for most of the night. They mourned her wrapped-up body together, speaking of how quickly her leadership had came and went. The oldest cats in the clan, Alpinefog and QuietDew, were the only ones who had known any other Riverclan leader.

Before dawn came, the warriors lifted her up- or rather parts of her, and took away the pieces to bury.

Late the next morning, Crescentpaw woke beside her sisters' occupied nests. The tabby-and-white she-cat had slept fitfully. Her littermates had moaned and twitched all throughout the night, but they were snoring away now.

She heard a few of Riverclan's warrior's discussing something outside, and pricked her ears before emerging. Rowanpaw and Tinypaw roused behind her, giving bleary-eyes glances across at

one another.

"-send another cat to the Moonpool. It's not safe, I'm telling you! And Starclan's communication is said to be strongest at night; when the stars glitter in the pool, and the moon has activated its powers." Some cat was rambling on as Crescentpaw shouldered her way out of the frond-stemmed opening. She passed the light pink and smooth pearl-white shells that lined the edges of the apprentices den, trodding the well-worn open path over to the other cats.

Their small throng was huddled beneath the largest elm tree today. It offered shade beneath its thick, lush leaves.

Crescentpaw hardly remembered the cold of her youth, when she'd experienced a leafbare that had been occupied in the nursery den space for most of it. Regardless, she was thankful for the warmth on her back; and the golden rays streaming down upon camp. There was hardly a cloud in the sky.

Oh, yay. Nice fishing weather today, it looks like! The Riverclan apprentice padded beneath the elm trees shade to join them.

"At least that's what Goldenheart told me! We were good friends, you know. I miss her... I hope she arrives back soon."

The meow belonged to Alpinefog. The mature tom lifted his broad muzzle with concern.

"But we *can't* go at night." Emberfawn sounded stressed, his meows gritty and low-pitched. "Unless... maybe we could send *one* cat." He lifted a claw suggestively, about to point to himself.

"No, Emberfawn!" Smallsparrow rolled his eyes. "I'm not sending one of the only warriors we have left over Windclan's plains. That would be a last resort." Riverclan's deputy sighed and lowered his voice, glancing at Rowanpaw and Tinypaw as they settled.

"For now we'll have to place our hopes on Goldenheart arriving with news from Starclan. But I fear.." he lowered his voice even further, so that Crescentpaw could no longer hear their exchange.

"That doesn't sound good. If Goldenheart doesn't come back, what

will the clan do?" Tinypaw asked.

Rowanpaw flicked her yellow-slitted gaze over her sister's dark pelt disdainfully, as if the answer was obvious.

"Well we'd have to send another cat to reach Starclan. That, or appoint a new medicine cat apprentice."

"But no cat here wants to be a healer apprentice," Tinypaw frowned, wrapping her tail around her paws.

Crescentpaw stayed silent. She thought that both ideas were absurd. Appoint a random cat without a connection to Starclan? Cringe. Losing more Clanmates on the way to the Moonpool? No thank you.

But I could go. I *could do it.*

Tinypaw turned her head towards the talking cats, pricking her ears and trying to hear their receeding whispers. Then she looked back toward the warriors den, as Crescentpaw began grooming herself.

Only they'd never trust an apprentice to make it to the Moonpool and back. And Aquasplash wouldn't agree either...

Her ears flattened with disappointment mid-lick, as she thought of her stern-but-kind mentor, who would always take the path that led to keeping her alive. Too many warriors, elders, and apprentices had died over the past few moons.

"I wish we could go hunting. If we were warriors already then we could just go." Rowanpaw opened her jaws to complain again.

"Houndspots is still asleep, and Aquasplash is wounded from last night's attack... it doesn't look like mine will be done chatting up the deputy soon." She frowned over at Alpinefog and the other three warriors forming the huddle.

The treetops began to sway with a light after-dawn breeze, shaking a few leaves loose and down onto their pelts. Crescentpaw turned her head towards the fresh-kill pile spot, seeing just a bare pile of earth with a ring of flattened grass around it.

"We could ask Quietdew or-" Tinypaw ventured.

"I have a better idea. Let's just go fishing ourselves. We can come back with something before they're done talking. The clan will be fed and then they'll take us battle training!"

Tinypaw frowned.

"Isn't that *not* a good idea? Smallsparrow could call us over at any minute. He could get mad if he finds us gone."

"Well... it's tempting." Rowanpaw cut in again. Her bronze chestnut-pelt was dull beneath the deep green swathe of shade. She nearly matched the dark cocoa-coloring of the dirt between the grass stems.

"There's not that many warriors left in the camp to hunt. We would be doing them a favor; and we can stay close together, so it's safe."

Crescentpaw nodded, her whiskers swaying up and down. "We'll come back quickly and leave quietly."

If I can prove that we're capable enough to hunt in the territory by ourselves, that might prove we're capable enough to make it to the Moonpool.

Plus, this could be the reminder Smallsparrow needs about our assessments. Warriors den, here I come!

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Heterochromia fun facts:
These are some of the only not-photoshopped photos I could track down of real tabby cats w heterochromia! That is because it is very rare for any cat to have heterochromia, And it is even more rare for a cat with dark fur to have the condition, although any color of cat can get it. The more melanin produced/ the darker the cat's coat, the harder it is to receive the two-colored eyes trait. So basically, Crescentpaw has a 1/10000 genetic condition. :D look it up iyw2!

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6

[image]

"You need to lean back farther," Tinypaw advised Rowanpaw, while Crescentpaw kept her own gaze fixated on the quiet waters among the pebbly stream-bed. This particular channel was quite thin, and closer to Greenleaf Twolegplace- so that the cats could hear them shouting and hollering from afar within the tall, water-logged grasses.

"It's a wonder we can even catch anything with them shouting so much!" Rowanpaw complained and flicked a bit of water from her whiskers, then wrinkled her snout with annoyance. "Why did we even choose this area?" She sneered.

"We didn't want to run into the sunhigh patrol, remember? They usually follow the bend around the thickest part of the river when they leave. And Emberfawn is hunting with Lagoonstripe in the marshes. I heard Quietdew mention it before we slipped out."

"Well this is still stupid," she growled crossly. "Besides; I'll only get ridiculed or told what I'm doing wrong here. I'm going to hunt by myself." With her fringed reddish-brown tail held high, she rose and began to stalk down the sandy shore.

"Someone put mouse-bile in her prey again?" Crescentpaw looked pointedly over at Tinypaw, who nodded and cracked a smile.

"I wish I could say I was guilty, but nope- she just acts that way. My, she's as testy as a fly." Tinypaw murmured lightheartedly as she leaned back from the water. With her ears pricked and muzzle tipped at an angle, she focused before feigning towards a shadow that she had thought was a fish.

"Mouse-dung frogs. Get out of my way!" Tinypaw hissed, lashing her tail and then quieting herself.

"Well, we could always send her Mother's way."

"If only," Tinypaw sighed agreement, and twitched her whiskers mischievously. Her black pelt rippled along her spine, shining where the light hit it as she moved.

Crescentpaw was only kidding, of course. She didn't actually despise her bark-brown sister- despite how repulsive her bad attitude could be, it was sort of understandable.

"What do you think the clan will do now that-"

"Hey! I found trapped prey!" Someone began yowling from beyond the overhanging water-reeds and switchgrass. The wind tugged on their stems gently at first, and then they violently began rattling and shaking. Rowanpaw hopped out a moment later, her ears pricked with enthusiasm.

"What do you mean?" Crescentpaw asked her russet-furred sister before hearing Tinypaw curse in annoyance, probably about her *actually-a-fish-this-time fish* being scared off.

"There's this weird mesh-contraption thing inside the sedge grasses near here. It's by the greenleaf Twolegpath," she said, her eyes focused on them as she breathlessly gasped for more air. "And I was trying to scent for a mouse or vole when I found it! It's got an entire carp inside."

Rowanpaw's yellow eyes were wider now, as if she were excited and proud. "I tried to get it out myself but it looks tricky. There's a flap that I need some other cat to keep pushed open for me, I think." Their littermate looked more and more apprehensive as she continued to ask for her sister's help. But Crescentpaw was quick to nod before Rowanpaw could react negatively again.

I don't want her to storm off for the dozenth time this week. Even though this idea seems dangerous, Rowanpaw deserves the thought of us at least taking a look. After all we were kind of just joking about her. Good thing she didn't hear...

"Where is it?" Crescentpaw blinked her dual-colored eyes at her

sister, her fur beginning to bush with excitement at the prospect of free prey. *Maybe it really can be that easy.*

"But it sounds like a Twoleg thing. And it's too close to the paths that they walk in Greenleaf," Tinypaw reasoned.

Impatiently, Rowanpaw began to flick her tail to and fro, opening her jowls to argue. A dragonfly flew above their ears as Crescentpaw cut her off.

"Well, yes- but we can at least check it out, right?" She gave her smaller black sister 'the stare.' Which in and of itself was saying *Let's not make her run off on her own again.*

After a moment of blank-eyed confusion her kin understood and nodded vigorously. "Oh yeah. I mean of course it couldn't hurt to look. We can come back here and fish on the way back. If you want to that is, Rowanpaw." Tinypaw tried to save face, speaking kindly instead of critically now.

Crescentpaw turned to follow her sister with an eager tail-flick, ready for the challenge. But she didn't miss Tinypaw's sad glance back at the water as she murmured, "Dang. I almost had a huge trout from in there!"

She swiveled an ear backwards in understanding but was also relieved when Tinypaw began following. Her second littermate trotted behind Rowanpaw as they nosed their way through the grass and away from the sandy shorebed. The she-cats were temporarily swathed in cool green shadow. Their vision was cut off; unless they should stretch their eyes above the overgrown leafage.

Crescentpaw was following Rowanpaw's fresh scent trail through the switchgrass when she began losing her, and a few minutes later the scent was nearly entirely replaced by the smell of Twoleg.

The grass was trampled a lot here. In a particularly high-reaching tuft of weeds sat a submerged wire-mesh contraption.

It was shaded by a tall, twisty tree. One end of the thing was flat and see-through, while the other was bent inward on one side. The

object was rectangular and mostly visible below the lined-up trees, but had ripped-up grass thrown atop and heaped beside it. The wires along the bottom had gaps, allowing the grass to grow through the floors of it as well.

"It's odd isn't it? The twolegs tried to make it seem like it's been here forever, but their scent is all over the place. And they've put food inside for us! But why?" Tinypaw stared almost dumbfoundedly at her sister, to which Crescentpaw almost laughed. She sat down on her haunches, her dark stripes blending into the shading of the overgrown grass stems.

"It obviously looks like a trap to me. We should leave it and go back to fishing. We could even hunt for land prey if you wanted to-"

"Ugh, anytime I have an idea you guys just think it's horrible." Rowanpaw began curling her lip, but Crescentpaw was quick to stand back up with her plumey tail held high.

"I think we should try it. I mean, we can't hear the Twoleg's shouts from *here*- and we all know that we could help get each other out if one gets stuck or trapped. There's three of us." Crescentpaw felt her stomach ball up into a knot, wondering if that was actually true.

But for once they had to support one of Rowanpaw's decisions. The reddish-brown she-cat had been growing farther apart from them in the recent moons, and more willing to avoid or even oppose them. Crescentpaw didn't like how her sister was withdrawing from their trio.

I'll support her in this. If anything just this once.

"All right then..." Their velvety black sister still sounded hesitant as she avoided their gazes, wrapping her tail around her dainty little paws. "So how would we use it?" Tinypaw asked uncertainly.

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Though it took quite some time, the she-cat's had found a way to get safely inside without getting trapped. One had to hold the

sideways metal flap-door open with their shoulders, while one held it with their paws to properly adjust it up or down; and provide as a fail-safe if the other cat slipped on the smooth metal they were holding above.

It was odd, but after many experimental tries Crescentpaw found that she was best at shouldering the flap open as far as she could, because she was the largest. Tinypaw would be the cat to go in and retrieve the fish since she was the smallest. And Rowanpaw used her paws and nails to push the flap even farther up, giving more of an opening than Crescentpaw could provide with her awkward leverage.

"I gof it!" Tinypaw mewed from around the fish in her jaws after she had securely grasped it. Now that it wasn't lying flat, the others could see that it was quite a large fish- almost wider than Tinypaw's head. Her jaws were stretched wide around it.

"Great!" Rowanpaw sounded pleased that her plan had worked. Crescentpaw stared over the tips of her sister's ears as she watched Tinypaw turn around in the metal box to face the exit's direction. She shimmied back toward them.

"I'm going to slif back through now, so puff it open as much as you can. I'll flaffen myself!" Tinypaw mumbled, laying her ears flat against her skull and squinting her eyes while she crouched.

As Crescentpaw pushed her shoulders up against the metal flap *hard,* she felt the it digging into her flesh. She nearly flinched at the pain but then instinctively turned her head as she heard something behind her.

There were voices. Twoleg sounds, coming from afar and growing louder. Snapping herself upright, she nearly let the metal slip from above her, then stiffened with panic.

7

[image] [image]

"Stay still, Rowanpaw! We have to get her out before those Twolegs see us."

But Rowanpaw began trembling. Crescentpaw's eyes widened as her sister turned towards her, removing her paws from the metal sheet and letting it fall several inches lower.

The brown she-cat's mouth was open with shock but no words were coming out.

She's going to flee again. She always does! Rowanpaw had always been a fight-or-flight kind of cat, who predominately preferred flight.

"Rowanpaw, stop! Grab the metal so Tinypaw can get out!" She almost screeched at her littermate, but Rowanpaw was already turning away. Her sister's tail bushed with fright, and it was swallowed up with the rest of her by the mass of weeds all around them.

Rowanpaw had fled. Her retreating pawsteps were soon unheard over the rambling of Twoleg voice, growing steadily louder as they came closer.

They're coming straight for us.

Panicking, she tried to lift her forelegs and push against the flap above her shoulders. Without Rowanpaw to provide leverage from the bottom edge it hardly moved. The metal sheet simply craned upward a few centimeters, but did not angle inward like it had with Rowanpaw's aid.

Crescentpaw tried something else. She moved into Rowanpaw's previous position, grabbing the metal sheet's edge with her paws and dew-caws. She swung it inward as hard as she could, but there

was nothing to force it high up enough. Increasingly desperate, she pushed her head against the ceiling. But it was too far from the sheet's center to properly move it.

Something crashed against the low-lying square plate, causing the entire box to shudder. As the cage rattled it ripped at their claws with it's metal wires below. Crescentpaw flinched away, but was fast enough not to let the flap fall fully back down. Tinypaw had one foreleg stretched partway underneath it, and the fish still in her jaws.

"Just let the fish go!" Crescentpaw snapped impatiently, worry crawling up her spine like worms. Her thick neck-fur was fluffed and her blue-and-yellow eyes stretched wide.

Tinypaw dropped it and kicked it behind her in one fluid movement, where it smacked the back of the box-trap. She flattened her entire body and tried to push her face beneath and through the flap but it only let her muzzle slip through.

"Starclan, no!" Crescentpaw wailed with fright as a Twoleg's heads came into view. Then another. There was two of them; one was only about half of the first's height- but both moved rather slowly through the grass, as if they weren't in a rush. As they advanced towards the cat's hiding spot, more and more of the colored pelts covering their bodies became visible.

It was clear that the Twoleg's knew the cats were there, because as Tinypaw scrabbled with her claws against the metal flap, and Crescentpaw pushed upward with all her might, they bent their heads around the tree to look.

Some sort of gibberish was still coming out of their mouths, but this time the cats knew that it was directly about them. *This can't be happening.* They must have heard Tinypaw crashing into the plate. With the edge of the metal door now cutting deep into her flesh, she gasped and fell back.

"Crescentpaw, wait! Don't leave me!"

One of the Twoleg's stepped towards the back of the trap, while the

other held its place a few paces away. Both had trampled the grass leading directly to the cats, stomping over it while both Crescentpaw and Tinypaw cringed with terror.

Beneath the golden-washed ivy-trendils, the silver birch trees that they were trapped around, and the cobalt chalky-pale sky, the Twoleg reached out a wrinkled paw and grasped the contraption. And somehow young Crescentpaw knew what would happen next. They would take her sister away. *I'll never see her again.* Her heart plummeted.

Wish a rush of adrenaline Crescentpaw responded with her first impulsive reaction. She flew forward before the box had lifted off the ground, tumbling her way into the flap. Her body pushed through it until she hit Tinypaw with a responding "oof!"

That was so easy, she thought in disbelief. How was it so effortless to push the flap inward to get *in*, but not inward to get *out*? *Dumb twoleg tricks!*

The little apprentice's eyes were wide as moons as she stared back at Crescentpaw. "Wow. Okay, just... wow. I figured you would scratch them, but-... that's something too."

And yet Tinypaw had a teensy weensy smile of relief on her face. Crescentpaw curled her tail around her sister's back as they were lifted up and carried away.

What Tinypaw and Crescentpaw got trapped in:

The box swayed gently back and forth as the older Twoleg marched out of the grass, plodding up to meet the younger one that was standing near the path. Crescentpaw stared at the ground blurring beneath them as the Twolegs walked. She could see the tiny dirt-Thunderpath from between the twisted wires. Unsettled and almost nauseated, she wondered what would happen next.

The cat's were carried for about half of a mile. The second twoleg accompanying the first eventually split off and took a different path. It was not long after that the cats were turned in an opposite direction and carried straight through Greenleaf Twolegplace.

Several other long-legged Twolegs walked among theirs, until they thinned out and a black-top before the lake came into view.

"There's so many Twolegs here, right on our border and Shadowclan's. We should've kept well away," Tinypaw whispered, her large blue-ish eyes round as she stared around at the odd sights.

Crescentpaw murmured agreement. She knew that was true. However, the she-cats were prevented from further discussing it when the Twoleg stopped beside a monster that was shiny and black.

Bewildered and certainly a bit petrified, the two apprentices felt their hearts drop. The Twoleg opened a flap on the side of the monster and set them inside. She then rounded the bend of the monster's sleek metal frame and climbed into it from the other side.

Rowanpaw

8 🌙

[image]

Crescentpaw (design not final)

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Continue reading below

It was Tinypaw and Crescentpaw's first time inside of a Twoleg nest and they did *not* like it. For one they were kept inside of the tiny trap-box on top of a little square table for the first night.

For two it smelled like other cats. Not toms, but she-cats-and yet Crescentpaw couldn't see any of them through the wire mesh box. It was dark in the room, and had been since the Twoleg had flicked a small switch on the wall, then exited through an archway.

"It stinks of Twoleg and stale air and it's so dark in here..." Tinypaw murmured, curling her skinny tail around herself where she crouched.

"Yes, but maybe those other cats will come to help us. Can't you smell them?" Crescentpaw flexed her whiskers, drawing in the scent of an elderly she-cat and a much, much younger one. Maybe even a kit.

"Yeah but that means they can smell *us*. And if they're in here they must not want to talk now. They're probably kittypets."

"I know," Crescentpaw eventually sighed. She could barely see her own swirly stripes, and even her white patches were dull in the gloom. Most of the light in their room emitted from around a doorway's edge, where the apprentices could hear twoleg voices droning on.

It was a television, of course- but they had no way of knowing. After a bit longer in the darkness Crescentpaw spoke up again.

"It sucks we can't open the flap up from in here. And also that we've ended up here like so many warriors before us. Despite not wanting to, like *they* did." She tried to half-heartedly joke to lighten the mood, and draw out the boringness of quiet.

Tinypaw lifted her head and blinked her large violet-blue eyes thoughtfully. "You mean how cats like Foxhop and Onemoon left the Clan to become kittypets? Yeah, I remember. Even though we were still kits." She was silent for a moment, but Crescentpaw could tell there was more that she wanted to say.

"And our mother Vixeneye." Her voice turned sour, and raw, and *real*. It quivered as Tinypaw let her emotions emerge around her one trusted littermate. "I think it would be great if I never saw her again. Not that she cares," the black she-cat growled admittedly.

"Mhmm." Crescentpaw nodded and crouched beside her. She felt her belly and haunches forced against the sides of the cage mesh. Their space was too small, and she was nearly twice as large as Tinypaw was. Her sister had been born a runt, unusually small even for a Windclan-sized cat. And most Riverclan apprentices were as large as average Windclan warriors, after generations of adapting to swimming with large webbed paws and broad legs and shoulders.

"But don't worry. Unlike them we didn't *choose* this. We'll get out of here and back to the Clan."

Tinypaw's eyes shone with worry in the near-darkness, but then she partway flattened her ears in disgust.

"Rowanpaw must have told them what happened by now. Maybe they're looking for us... but oh, if only she hadn't of ran off on us!" The sleek black she-cat spat.

Crescentpaw's own point of view on that topic was still confusing to her. On one paw she had seen it as her sister simply panicking. But on the other- her littermate had done this *many* times before. She was always the first cat to climb a tree to get away from the wolves-

whether that meant clawing another cat's back on her way up, or not. *But it can't be intentionally.*

"Rowanpaw didn't mean to abandon us like that. She just got scared," She told her sister. Crescentpaw licked her littermate's ear gently, before studying her grass-stained paws.

"She probably told the camp as much and they'll be on lookout for us. Don't worry, as soon as we get out of this Twoleg trap we can find a way to get out." She tried to stay calm for herself and Tinypaw as well.

"For now why don't we eat the fish?" The tabby-and-white she-cat nudged her sister with her muzzle. "It'll soon start rotting anyways." The wire beneath their pads pricked into their paws as they stood up.

Tinypaw nodded briskly, doing a 180 toward the fish, which had been right behind them in their teeny space. She took a bite as Crescentpaw turned that way as well.

"Alrighf," Tinypaw proclaimed through her mouth-full of carp.

Early the next morning Crescentpaw's eyes flicked open at the sound of an approaching Twoleg. The apprentice's hearts were pounding by the time she had rounded the corner.

The lady was a little old thing with frayed white hair and a croaking singsong voice. With slippers sliding across the fuzzy carpet, the dark room was soon illuminated; as the trembling Twoleg flicked on the lightswitch. She spoke calmly to the two cats, before opening the door to the trap by releasing a latch that they had not even noticed before.

At first neither realized what was happening. But then the two apprentices looked at each other quellingly. Crescentpaw was the first to nod and bolt forward, attempting escape.

But unfortunately this old Twoleg was experienced with things like

that. And so she was ready when Crescentpaw head-butted into her hands- which were blocking the way out.

Tinypaw backed against the cage wall again, but Crescentpaw kept trying. When the hand moved in front of her face to block her again, she lifted a paw to scratch it.

"Wait! I'm just giving you some food and water," the elderly woman said frantically- but Crescentpaw couldn't understand. She extended her claws and swiped downward, drawing blood on the wrinkled fingers. Tinypaw stayed behind her, cowering with her fur fluffed. Both she-cat's eyes were huge with fright.

"Ouch!" The elderly woman spat and withdrew her hairless paw to begin closing the cage flap. She managed to stick the bowl of water in there with them before retreating.

"Hurry, Tinypaw!" Crescentpaw leaped forward, past the water bowl and open metal flap portion. She turned to wait for Tinypaw at the entrance. Up on the wooden table where their cage-trap sat, the old woman shoved Crescentpaw back in and stuck a kittypet food bowl in the exit path.

Tinypaw had hardly moved, and Crescentpaw was disheartened to hear the flap lock closed behind her. She turned to look at her kin, eyes flat.

"I'm sorry," Tinypaw exclaimed in a fierce whisper, her moon-round eyes reflecting the ceiling light as they were picked up and moved. "I got scared. I-I hate Twolegs." She turned her fluffy face away with a pout.

"Well then, off to the vet." The elderly woman said in her own language before bending down to pick up the live trap by its handle.

The cats didn't understand her, and so they were even more confused as they were loaded into a car and driven down the street to a local community vet clinic.

Tinypaw and Crescentpaw were freaked out the entire way there-

feeling the vibrations and ticks of the car gliding along the road at their unfathomable speeds once again. But upon arrival they found the scents even more jarring.

So many other animals; some prey, some predator. Luckily they were contained inside of their carrier, because Tinypaw had nearly hyperventilated at being brought into yet another Twoleg nest. Crescentpaw did her best to shield her sister, flanking the smaller she-cat as they were air-lifted through the clinic and into an examination room.

Some time later, the apprentices were examined through the cage by a veterinatian technician. Being looked at by another Twoleg was not taken particularly well by either cat, as Crescentpaw hissed and Tinypaw cringed- with her eyes nearly bulging out of her skull.

"I'd like them to be declawed today," the woman said forwardly in tones that the cats could not understand.

9

[image]

"The littler one is quite timid, but the big one has already scratched me up pretty good." She rubbed her fingers, *tsk*ing.

The veterinarian technician lifted a brow, looking up from her clipboard.

"Mrs. Harrison," she said patiently. "You know you cannot declaw cats that are part of your trap-neuter-release program? They need their claws to survive out there!"

"Oh, yes I know." Mrs, Harrison waved a hand at her, smiling and unoffended. She adjusted her glasses to better look at the terrified, puff-furred cats. The tabby and white one was snarling with warning, its ears flat and claws extended as it crouched against the black one.

"I found them at a different spot. I was at Blue Lake Camping Grounds yesterday when a young boy who was interested in the program told me he'd seen cats around the other side of the lake. Of course it was too overgrown over there, so I just tried next to one of their hiking trails instead." Her teeth clacked together, the glue of her dentures softening and causing them to nearly fall out.

"But these two are quite young. I plan to make them my house cats," she murmured thoughtfully. The old woman then began picking up her word-pace, rambling. "I know I rehomed those five-month old motherless kittens we found last year, but now I think that two cats around Quri's age could fit into my home quite well. She seems to bother my older cat, Celia, you see. Even though they're related show-line bengals, Celia has gotten pretty far up there in her years now. And I don't go to cat shows anymore."

"Hmmm..." the tech took a moment to answer, but then nodded. "Well, I'll let our veterinarian know all of that before he comes to see you. Really it's down to his recommendation." She lifted her

head to stare at Mrs. Harrison directly in the eye. "Doctor Elsher will have to perform an evaluation under anesthesia because they are, however, old enough to be considered feral. You trapped them yesterday, right?"

The two she-cats stared through the bars of the cage at the flat-faced twolegs uncertainly. The old woman nodded.

"Oh, I can see that. And yes." She laughed and smiled at the young red-haired woman kindly. "But I think they could adjust to my home eventually. Don't you?"

When Crescentpaw awoke she sensed the white-pelted Twolegs touching her. And yet she could hardly see or focus on them.

The she-cat was too disoriented to even realize where she was. But at least she could feel Tinypaw's sleek black pelt beside hers.

She stifled a meow of confusion. Her perception contorted so badly that she fell asleep again within a few harrowing moments.

It was not until the next day that Crescentpaw woke again. She heard the sound of a white-pelted Twoleg opening their cage door. He then reached in to unwrap tan bandages from around the apprentices' two front legs. There was bloody gauze around their paw-pads that had to be peeled away, causing Crescentpaw to wince. However, the pain was somehow subdued- and she found that she was still too drugged to react further. She could hardly even interpret what was happening, let alone why.

Tinypaw was still stirring as the Twoleg placed a small bowl of fresh kittypet food, and then water inside the cage. Crescentpaw stared at the creature, noticing how odd and pink it's face looked.

In fact, everything looked odd. They were now inside of a different, larger cage. The walls were white, almost everything was white-

save for the smooth grey of the back-room's flat tables, and the metal of their shiny cage bars. IV's stood thin and tall on their versatile round black wheels. Shiny white flooring contrasted itself with dark-tan grout. The room was lined with light pink baseboards and windowsills. Each set of blinds was white-on-white to the silk-smooth curtains, which were drawn closed along each window.

Adjacent to either side of the entrance door stood two fake Kentia palm trees. They were the only flashes of green in this shiny, overly-reflective place.

Thoughts of escape were beginning to stir in Crescentpaw's mind as the Twoleg shut the door. They only caused her head to swirl with disorientation more. She lowered her muzzle back down.

Once more the she-cats rested in their trapped metal space. Tinypaw managed a few croaky mews of "Where are we? Why do I feel so weak?" But Crescentpaw could hardly give her an answer. All she knew was that they were inside of another Twoleg-place nest. So she gave a feeble glance of uncertainty in response to the questions.

They curled their tails around each other, and Crescentpaw laid her face near Tinypaw's as they fell asleep for the second night.

Crescentpaw and Tinypaw felt a lot more lively at dawn the next morning. Their lethargy had all but disappeared. When the apprentices awoke they tried to stretch in their small space, but had almost no room to do so.

A passing vet assistant walking by noticed them, and stopped to do its twoleg mumbling.

"If it opens the door soon maybe we can jump out." Crescentpaw stared at the Twoleg's pale face hopefully, her one-blue, one-yellow eye shining.

Tinypaw agreed but the flat-faced creature soon left. The two she-

cats looked at their paws for a few heartbeats, wondering why they had been wrapped in gauze the previous nights before. They were soon distracted by the Twoleg door swinging open again. It wasn't much longer that they were released from their cage by a different twoleg.

The apprentices were shocked when they were scruffed by the weird hairless paws immediately- and then put into another transport box.

"Oh, great Starclan..." *They really know how to grab us quickly!* Crescentpaw hissed as the veterinarian expertly blocked them from jumping out with tree-trunk like arms.

"Whatever. At least we won't have to be in this horrid-scented place anymore," Tinypaw mewed, squashed against her sister in the carrier. The two cats murmured amongst each other, forced into a crouch because of the ceiling's low base.

"Yeah. And whatever they did made me sleep way too much. We've been gone from the clan for three sunrises!" Crescentpaw turned her head worriedly, staring at the smooth plastic walls with air-holes.

"I know." Tinypaw shifted beside her, sounding serious. "I hope no other cats have... *died*, since we've been gone." She sounded apprehensive to say the words.

They were passed off to their new owner, Mrs. Harrison. The cats were slowly carried towards the car and loaded inside of it, but this time they could assume where they were going. Crescentpaw's fur began to stand on end as she wondered what cats were left back in Riverclan. *And now it's back to the old Twoleg's nest, trapped in the dark and in a box for hours until we can somehow escape.*

But I shouldn't let Tinypaw see my fear. It may scare her worse.

"Well think of it this way. It's also only been three nights since we were captured. Two in this place and one in the Twoleg's nest." She raised her voice as the car turned onto a main road. Bouncing and vibrating, the cat carrier's plastic floor shook beneath their paws.

"With any luck those dung-hearted wolves hunted elsewhere for a little while- and they haven't attacked after sundown since we've left."

"Yeah... I hope so." Tinypaw didn't sound reassured at all, to which Crescentpaw sighed.

"I'll make sure we escape. I promise," she mewed with an edge, and Tinypaw pricked her ears. Her huge blue-ish eyes were just an inch away, and nearly glowing in the small gloomy space. This time when she answered, she sounded as if she truly believed her.

"I know you will."

Crescentpaw

10

[image]

When the she-cats were brought back into the house they were once again reminded of the other cats that resided there. Their scent flowed throughout every crevice and clung to every stair that led down to the mouse-infested basement.

And because they had not expected it, the apprentices were astonished when the Twoleg dumped them from their cage and gently onto the carpeted floor.

No more Twoleg box-traps! Oh thank you Starclan, because it's been DAYS!

The floors, too, were full of golden-brown cat hair. But first Crescentpaw immediately looked towards the way out.

Ugh. Of course the only exit is closed.

Through that glass-paned door she could see the light to outside. Every other natural light source was covered with a heavy blanket or black-flowered curtain, shrouding the room in a harsh yellow glow. The ill-placed ceiling lights above were no help, either-stinging her eyes and giving them an eerie experience of artificial lighting.

Her gaze moved along the edges and corners of the ceilings and then the baseboards. *Nothing...*

"Sister."

Crescentpaw took a moment longer to search, but when she finally turned she locked eyes with a strange cat that had appeared from far across the room. Tinypaw was faced towards them, stilled into a defensive crouch against the muted lavender carpet.

"Who are you? Why haven't you said hello before this, kittypet?"

Crescentpaw liked the ring of confidence in Tinypaw's voice, but even she was a little unsure. She had never met a kittypet before. Did they really not mind other cats on their territory? In their *nests*?

The cat's dark outline moved from beneath a wooden table. She padded fluidly and sleek like a she-cat would. There was a feminine curve to her muzzle as well, but also a large sloping forehead that resembled that of an adolescent's.

As she moved even closer Crescentpaw nearly gasped at her uniquely marked pelt.

Now, she knew that hers was a bit distinctive on its own- with the white crescent mark on her face, and blue-black tabby swirls along her flanks and haunches. But this she-cat was practically dipped in *gold*; and then spotted with dappled brown leaf-shade.

"Hi!" The young cat mewed in a high-pitched, enthusiastic voice. "I didn't approach you yet because Caracal said it was rude when you were so new here and already nervous and stuck in the cat-trap. So I waited until you got back from the vet." She halted a few paces away, but her blotchy tail-tip was flipping with excitement.

"I just wanted to come and ask your names and if you like it here or not. But also I wanted to ask other things before you went back to your Colony because usually the other cats don't come back after their vet appointments so I always miss my chance to ask them abou-"

"Oh. Uhh-..." Crescentpaw lifted a paw uncertainly, interrupting the she-cat before even more questions could be piled upon them. "What are you even talking about? We have no idea about half of what you're saying!"

"Oh, uh? What?" The kittypet looked confused, as if she hadn't just confused Crescentpaw with her rambling as well.

"Oh, wow!" The she-cat broke off with a gasp. "And you're my age, too! Well, sort of. It seems like it, I think. Are you?" Her golden-yellow eyes, just a few shades lighter than her pelt, were round with eagerness.

What a one-track mind Crescentpaw thought, but didn't say it out loud.

"We're probably a bit older." Tinypaw was about the same size as the spotted kittypet, as she pointed a claw back and forth between them forlornly. She had abandoned her defensive crouch and was sitting with her tail around her paws. Crescentpaw did the same, then leaned forward to groom her fluffy white chest-fur.

"And I'm Tinypaw and she's Crescentpaw."

"Your eyes are so cool, Crescentpaw! But those are weird names." Cheetah looked Tinypaw up and down, as if expecting her paws to be abnormally tiny.

Crescentpaw blinked, then further responded; "We're from Riverclan, so our names are like that. What's a vet?""

The spotted she-cat rolled her eyes towards the ceiling as she explained, as if bored. "They always ask that!" With her head thrown back she groaned, her spiky white teeth flashing. "It's a whitecoat's building with people that heal you, or give you pokey-spiky jabs to keep you from getting sick in the future. After she takes you to the vet-place the old lady brings you back to where she found you."

Of course neither she-cat answered for a few moments; and apparently the kittypet took that as her opportunity to ask another question.

"But what's a Riverclan? I've never heard the colony cats talk about that place before. Is it another part of their territory?" The kittypet's long whiskers twitched as she spoke.

"It's... uh. Well, I don't think so. But we don't know what a colony cat is."

The young she-cat was quick to answer, which Crescentpaw just assumed was one of her quirks at this point. She found herself smiling at the little cat, though.

It's odd. Usually I'd be super annoyed at someone talking this much. But

she's.... Interesting somehow. The soft carpet cushioned the she-cat's haunches as they sat in a circle facing each other.

"The colony cats said that their group is a collection of families living behind the tallest part of the city," the spotted cat recited. "But if you aren't them, then I've got to know more about the place that you come from!"

The spotted Kittypet

If you didn't know, Bengal cats are a domesticated breed of hybrid cats that were crossed between domestic cats and the wild Asian Leopard Cat, which is a wildcat species native to (you guessed it) Southeast Asia. Bengal cats are larger than domesticated cats and are known for being athletic with a slender but muscular build. They are usually difficult to maintain inside of inactive homes where they don't have enough exercise, play space interaction or attention.

11 🌙

[image]

The two she-cats kept telling the kittypet about Riverclan, and what it was like, and what apprentices were expected to do. They came to find out that the kittpet's name was Cheetah; and fittingly so. Her shoulders were slim yet strong, with long spotted limbs and tall, rounded ears. Cheetah was a pretty young she-cat, but she could hardly contain her excitement- eating up every word that the apprentices had to offer about Clan life. And how much it differed from that of a Colony Cat's.

As Crescentpaw felt the time slipping by she shifted her paws impatiently at Cheetah's questions. The other two cats looked over at her with slight concern.

"What's wrong Crescentpaw?" Tinypaw asked her sister, irises glowing as the light outside dimmed. Not even a whisker-tug of air flitted through the room. It was stale and still-aired, unlike anything Crescentpaw had ever felt before. It was like being... underground, somehow. With a roof above her but no crickets just outside the den. No night breeze pushing through the fern-entrance and cooling the cat's backs. No plants or twittering prey. *Nothing growing in here but dust.*

"We need to get back to our Clan." Her voice turned sour with worry as she focused on Tinypaw. "But there's no way out unless Cheetah knows of one."

Crescentpaw of course once again thought of resorting to violence. If the twoleg tried to leave she could just scratch her legs or climb up to her face to distract her. *But that may cause bleeding...*

"Oh! They always ask about that, too, instead of waiting. But I'm sure she will put you back where she found you tomorrow or so. She's just keeping you guys here for a little longer because... wellllll-." Tinypaw twitched her whiskers with mock-amusement.

"Yeah, I don't know. She does such weird things for weird reasons. But it's just her and us, and it's been that way for quite awhile now." She chattered. "So I'm sure she will return you to where you came from."

Tinypaw's responding mew sounded avoidant and annoyed, as she wiped the grin of amusement off of her face and stood up to stretch.

"Well we can't just wait around. Our clan is in awful need of us. We *need* to escape tonight. Is there any openings we can slip through?" Crescentpaw's jet-black sister arched her spine before stretching out her forepaws, but then something odd happened. She winced, retreating a paw into her chest-fur and licking it. Then the apprentice winced even farther and flicked her paw outward.

"Not really," Cheetah said despondently. "The windows are all nailed shut."

"What's wrong?" It was Crescentpaw's turn to ask Tinypaw this, as her sister deeply frowned and lifted her head to stare at her.

"Stretch your paws out. Try to stretch your claws. And look... at... them." Sounding horrified, Tinypaw's eyes became slits of terror. Her mouth fell open and her ears flattened, causing Crescentpaw's fur to fluff out in apprehensive confusion.

"Why?" The dark tabby-and-white apprentice asked while following Tinypaw's instructions anyway. She, too, was surprised to feel a deep prick of pain in response to the flexing of her forepaws. The pain subsided when she relaxed them, but now there was a dull ache left behind that wasn't there before.

Trying not to initially panic, Crescentpaw calmly lifted a forepaw to inspect it. Though the pain was tolerant, it flared up immediately as she extended her toes to further expose her claws.

No silver-tipped claws appeared. She flicked her paw in response to the biting pain. Just like Tinypaw had.

It felt as if teeth were gnawing into her forepaws when she tried to extend them. Now, as she lowered one forepaw to look at the other,

that same throbbing sensation intensified upon touching the carpeted floor.

"I-I don't see any claws in this paw either," her littermate whispered beside her, stunned into a stupor. Crescentpaw couldn't speak as her heart rate accelerated. Some sort of newfound grief closed her throat up, choking her into wordlessness.

So Tinypaw was the first one to react. She turned a burning glare on the kittypet.

"Your stupid Twoleg took... OUR CLAWS FROM US?!" Tinypaw shrieked. It came out in an ear-piercing, trilling yowl of rage and confused pain. She jumped up with her tail spiked out, her eyes blazing and tiny pupil-slits pinpointed on Cheetah.

At the fiery, burning, singing pain in her front paws, Crescentpaw was nearby obligated to do the same. As Cheetah cringed away a dark smear crouching beneath the stairs shot forward. A cat with bony but broad shoulders and a large-framed gait bounded their way over to them. The shadows previously swamping her pelt lifted as she rapidly approached, showing a short-furred golden pelt. She finished crossing the floor in four large bounds, halting in front of Cheetah and covering the younger cat's entire body.

It was another spotted cat, sort of similar in fur pattern to Cheetah. She partly crouched on the floor in front of her kin, spotted tail high over her back. It was bushed out to twice its size, long and dappled like the rest of her. Crescentpaw momentarily forgot about her pain, her eyes stretching wide at the presence of an adult cat.

"Don't you dare blame my grandkit!" The newcomer spat in a scraping tone of condemnation. Her defensive posture reduced a bit, as Tinypaw and Crescentpaw stayed silent.

"It's not her fault for anything my Twoleg did to you. And if you've got a problem with either of *them*, you've got a problem with me."

Her voice was grating, and Crescentpaw flattened her ears. *She's defending the Twoleg as well!*

"But they just said they lost their claws, Caracal!And you scaring them is going to make them not wanna be my friends." Cheetah objectified from behind her kin, sticking her spotted face out to peer worriedly across at them.

"I heard what they said;" Caracal snarled, her broad muzzle twisting into a grimace. "They were about to double up on you! And if they think they're going to hurt you, I'm here to stop them."

"With what?" Tinypaw blurted. "We don't even have our front claws!" Her mew was filled with attitude.

Caracal growled, her darker neck-fur ruffling. She stood up to her full height and stalked closer to Tinypaw. "Are you daft? Cats still have their *jaws* after they've been declawed. And inside of jaws is *teeth*." She snapped hers in feigned intimidation.

As her sister cringed away from the large kittypet Caracal's gaze swept over to Crescentpaw, who was waiting with a tense stance close by. In case the kittypet decided to attack them.

"Hm. You two are barely older than my grand-kit. Practically still kits as well!" She sounded sympathetic now, which was a major switch from her previous attitude.

This time it was Crescentpaw's turn to claw some perspective into her words. "We're actually supposed to be warriors within just over a quarter moon. We're apprentices, not kits!"

The silence stretched on for a moment, tense and full of pressure. Then Cheetah cut in.

"What's declawed mean, Gran-cat?"

Caracal blinked in acknowledgement to the question. Her agressive posture vanished, her hackles beginning to smooth. Tinypaw still glanced fearfully her way, though.

"Declawing is something that I've seen done to other cats in the past. Ones that I used to live with in my younger years showed me how they'd returned from the vet without their front claws, not knowing how or why." Her amber-orange eyes pieced through

Crescentpaw's own.

"And look, I get that you're... older than kits." Her face was curious. "But what I'm not getting is why *our* human had you declawed at the vet. Other cats have scratched her before, and she's never had the vet do this to them." Caracal turned her head and looked loftily towards the living room archway, where the twoleg was watching her loud noise-box.

Crescentpaw flattened her ears as the old she-cat came into her space and swiftly grabbed one of her paws. She took care to grab the apprentice by the wrist at first, rather than right below the toes. The elderly cat then lifted it up close to her frizzled whiskers, examining it. When she began to apply pressure to the paw-pads Crescentpaw flinched.

Her mind was alerting to the pain signals, making her want to jerk back. She hissed to supress it, digging her back claws into the hairy purple-gray carpet. *Great Starclan, thank goodness I still have those ones!* The black-blue tabby she-cat lashed her tail with repulsion. *Why would a twoleg do that to us?*

"They definitely did take out your front claws. They aren't fully healed yet, either. I imagine it's hurting because the vet's pain herbs are wearing off."

———

12 🌙

[image]

Tinypaw was crouched on the ground behind them. She despairingly muttered "what's a pain relief?"

Surprisingly Caracal didn't sound impatient or bothered as she evenly answered, "what it sounds like. It's a relief to the pain, but it's in the form of the neck-jabs or these white pellets they make you swallow."

Crescentpaw could hazily remember having a twoleg forcing her to swallow two white tablets, but it had been in her period of extreme tiredness. She also recalled eating some rock-hard meaty pellets that split between her teeth when she bit down hard. The apprentices had eaten the dried food only when they'd felt their stomachs cramp with starvation.

So that's why they had the soft white leaf wrapped around our paws. Despite the claws being bloody and torn out, we couldn't feel it because of the Twoleg 'pain relief.'

She tried licking her paws to soothe them, but immediately yowled and bit her tongue in failure.

"How long is this going to last?" Crescentpaw felt her heart throbbing at the fear of this pain becoming long-lasting. She had never felt a blistering torment like this before. It reached all the way into her paw-bones, straining and yanking at them with horrifying energy. Her body began shaking and emitting fear-scent.

"I'm not sure, dears." Caracal once again surprised them by laying down next to Crescentpaw, pressing her flank against the apprentice's tabby haunch.

"But me and Cheetah will be right here with you. If you need anything, tell us. In a moment I'm going to see if I can get the twoleg to help you. She should have some more of those white

pellets from the vet."

Comforted that someone knew what to do to help, the tabby-and-white she-cat lifted her head to look for her sister. Tinypaw was still just a few paces away, now settled next to Cheetah. Cheetah looked over with sympathy on her golden-spotted face.

"Don't worry, we will stay with you while you heal."

Crescentpaw frowned and looked down at her paws.

But I don't want to heal. I want to escape and get back to the clan. And... will Riverclan even want us if we don't have our claws anymore?

It wasn't much longer than Crescentpaw and Tinypaw had to lie there in agony. Caracal eventually got the twoleg to come into the spare room, where she finally heard the meows of anguish and remembered the cat's pain medications.

It was a bit of trouble when the Riverclan cats wouldn't open their mouths to receive it. But the old woman found some slabs of deli meat in her fridge and ground them up to put with it. The apprentices begrudgingly accepted.

Crescentpaw only scarfed it down because Caracal and Cheetah encouraged her to, while Tinypaw seemed so pain-wrought that she ate it while choking. In Tinypaw's mind she would eat anything to stop the pain. Even revolting crow-food smelling rot like kittypet food.

After a fitful sleep through most of the remaining evening they woke early the next day. The woman had opened some dusty dark curtains hanging from the windows, finally revealing a shaft of natural light. Then she opened the front door and walked out, closing it shut with a creak behind her. Crescentpaw blinked blearily towards the window. She noticed Caracal sitting in a pool of sun beneath it.

The light cast on the floor illuminated her pelt to near-gold. Its bronze-and brown color was several shades darker than Cheetah's light-yellow sandy colored pelt. But it was still just as beautiful.

Crescentpaw watched as she felt the tingling in her paws, wanting so desperately to stand up and join the she-cat, but knowing it would just cause more pain.

"Could you try to remind the twoleg about the herbs when she gets back?" Crescentpaw croaked, her throat dry and parched. Caracal turned her head sharply as she heard her, bounding out of the sun she had been luxuriously soaking up.

"Yes dear. She should be back soon... But I hope you're feeling a little better?" The bronze-spotted she cat asked, leaning down to sniff the white fur patch on Crescentpaw's face.

"Not really. My paws are so sore I don't want to move them. I know they'll just hurt and throb," she admitted, letting herself be weak in front of the kittypets. "I'm sorry," she opened her jaws wretchedly to ask for water again. "Can I please have-"

Cheetah raced across the floor, her pawsteps pattering on the carpet with muffled slaps. "Yep! I'm getting it. I'll get the food, too!" She first sunk her teeth into the plastic water bowl, dragging it over to the apprentices with minimal spillage. Then Cheetah returned with the ceramic dried cat-food bowl.

"Thank you," Crescentpaw murmured after a few laps, but didn't feel hungry enough to eat the food. She winched as another wave of pain rolled over her injured paws, extending up into the forelegs and past her shoulders. The tabby-and-white apprentice had to clench her teeth to bite off a yowl.

Cheetah looked excited to have another conversation with them, but her back hunched with disappointment as she realized they were in too much pain to chat. Crescentpaw was now curled around herself. Her back seized against the agony. Tinypaw hissed with pain and thumped back against the soft ground behind her.

"It's alright, Cheetah. They'll be able to converse with us more after

they're feeing better."

The younger spotted feline turned her fluffy head towards her grand-cat. "But they really, *really* want to get back to their River-clan grand-cat. I won't have long to talk to them." Her huge golden eyes shimmered with worry.

"I know. But why don't you tell me more about this Riverclan of theirs? You can talk to me for now. And let's go back to the sunlight patch. It won't be there for long," Caracal knew that the twoleg would probably close it off when she got back. And yet she felt it drawing her toward its piercing rays. There was an invisible chain between her and that ill-experienced sunlight.

How intriguing, this talk of an afterlife called Starclan... and living in the cattails and wild grasses beside a lake. So much different than the Colony cat's stories.

As the apprentices sipped water and nibbled at the food, and then fell into a painful silence, the grand cat listened to her daughter's daughter's wonders. Intruige and interest peaked in her voice. And as the old she-cat listened, she folded her paws in on themselves and sympathetically watched the suffering Clan cats.

I wonder if there's a way that we could help them get home.

_____

Caracal

13

[image]
[image]

Crescentpaw didn't know how she got through that week of on-and off torment, because the twoleg forgot their white tablets every other day or so. Most of the time all she felt was burning, searing affliction on her claw-tips. Like they were still being wrenched out anytime she moved.

But she also felt the touch of the other cat's fur as they crouched beside her, comforted her, and gave her water or kittypet food. They did the same for Tinypaw. And once the elderly she-cat even caught them a mouse from the basement.

On the the fifth day of laying on the carpet writhing in a throbbing heap of exhausted turmoil, Crescentpaw had nearly lost hope. However, on the sixth morning without her claws, she jolted upright. She took in her surroundings once again, and this time her paws stung a lot less.

She pressed them firmly to the ground, feeling the hard floor beneath the cushioned carpets. Her missing claw-tips ached a little but the blinding agony no longer engulfed her. Her vision was sharper after she had eaten a full meal of kittypet food the previous night, despite its bitter taste and greasy residue. She felt well-rested.

"Tinypaw!" Crescentpaw bounded lightly over to her sister. "How do your paws feel now?"

She was surprised to take in the fact that they had lain in the middle of the den-floor for almost an entire quarter-moon. Cheetah and her grand-cat often climbed atop the stairway rails or down the cement steps to the basement. They jumped atop windowsills and ran across the Twoleg's tables. They even hid between and underneath furniture, dodging objects around the den walls as they traversed.

But we couldn't do that with our paws hurting so badly, and our foreclaws missing. Does this mean we can never climb again?

"They're actually a lot better now. Yesterday after the twoleg forgot our herb-rock I thought they were infected," Tinypaw admitted. "But now it only stings if I strike them firmly against the ground." She demonstrated by whacking a tiny black paw against the carpet and twitching uncomfortably. However, Tinypaw looked back at her with focused eyes that weren't crinkled with the edge of a painful glint; like they had been night before.

"Then we've got to get out of here today. *Now*, even! As soon as the twoleg gets up we'll wait for her to open the door." Crescentpaw had the impulse to knead her paws into the carpet excitedly. She felt a frown cross her muzzle as she remembered that she couldn't do that anymore.

"Okay," Tinypaw agreed, but her kin was now feeling a spasm of grief. The tabby-and-white apprentice fought to expel her negativity. *Whatever the clan thinks, worry about it later!* She told herself firmly. *We aren't staying here. We have to get back outside, at least. And out of this Twolegplace.*

Caracal and Cheetah were dozing on the stairwell that led upstairs. Crescentpaw meowed for them, and they both leapt down in unison after a quick stretch.

"Ohmygoodness look they're finally walking around! Does this mean you guys feel better? Better enough to tell me more about the Clans?" Cheetah squeaked, sounding ecstatic as she waved her blotchy tail.

"Well, sort of." Crescentpaw chucked nervously. "Our paws are feeling a lot better, but we want to talk about *escaping* this place. Our clan needs us very badly."

Neither cat looked surprised, but Cheetah still flattened her large ears against her skull. Now that the time had actually come she seemed to want to objectify more than ever. The now-closed curtain enveloped them all in near-darkness again. And even if some of the cats weren't actively acknowledging it, they all yearned to feel the

sun.

"But you guys are the coolest cats I've met! And... and..." For once, Cheetah was speechless. Crescentpaw shifted her paws guiltily at the fact that she was leaving her newfound friend.

Oddly enough, though; none yearned to see and feel the light again more than Caracal did. And so she was the first of the two to nod maturely down at them.

"We will help you escape. But you can't hurt my human in the process, so we'll have to figure out a different way." The seasoned she-cat lifted her tail and stepped closer. There was a grin on her greying muzzle.

"Me and Cheetah were talking about your Clans, and I think they sound neat. We understand why you'd want to get back to them," she shot her grand-kit a stern look for complaining before swiftly perking her ears at Crescentpaw and Tinypaw.

The kittypet's words then softened, and she slightly tilted her head with sympathy. "Our... Twoleg, as you call them, should be awake to feed herself soon. But since you woke up earlier than usual today, we have to wait until then." Caracal sat down with eyes patiently half-slitted.

Tinypaw was craning her head to look up at the much larger adult cat, while Crescentpaw's gaze was nearly level with hers.

"Fine." Her kin mewed and impatiently paced around while Crescentpaw sat to give herself a thorough grooming. The echo of an ache in her paw-pads radiated through her toes as she moved them, cleaning her underbelly and then her chest-fur. Tinypaw began doing the same until her fur was sleek and shiny.

"You two should eat before we go. And you as well, Cheetah. If they're planning to travel to their River-clan without stopping; and I assume they are, by how they've described their need to get back- then they'll need a bellyfull of food." Caracal sounded wise as she consoled them, and Cheetah obediently went over to the food bowl first.

Young Crescentpaw inwardly cringed at having to eat the Twoleg food again. But it was either that or walk on the hard cement stairs down to the basement, just to try hunting a mouse with no claws. *Yeah right. I'd just make a fool of myself if I tried. Plus my paws are still sore.* Feeling so useless and trapped was beginning to get to her, so she avoided it by asking;

"Caracal, how did you get your name? Isn't a Caracal one of the unspotted smaller predator cats?" Crescentpaw tried to make her mew sound unoffensive, because she was just genuinely curious to know. Her father hadn't spoken much about the old Clan legends, but she recalled him telling her the stories when he visited them in the nursery. Their explanations had branched into topics of other wildcats like Pumas, Caracals, Bobcats and Ocelots. Crescentpaw had wanted to know all of the different kinds.

"Yes it is." The broad-shouldered spotted cat raised her eyebrows with interest. "It's funny, really. Our breed of housecat all have spotted pelts, but we still use unspotted wildcat names. It's a tradition passed down by our kin's mothers." She sounded delighted to share information about her family.

"The problem is we couldn't all be named Leopard or Jaguar." She twitched her whiskers. "So I got stuck with Caracal, and then Cheetah's mother I named Lynx." An awkward silence followed after, filled only with the crunch of Cheetah eating the kittypet food. The young golden she-cat seemed to inhale a bit of dust from the bowl. She licked her jaws distastefully and then sneezed it out.

"May I ask what happened to Cheetah's mother?" Tinypaw whispered, lifting a sleek black eyebrow with suspicion. Crescentpaw could tell that she was once again suspecting the Twoleg.

"My human didn't do anything to her if that's what you're wondering," Caracal whipped her head towards Tinypaw with a defensive growl, then sighed.

"Anyways I don't think now is the time to discuss that." The old she-cat's voice lowered. Cheetah finished and padded loftily towards them, her belly full and swaying.

"Gosh, it was dusty. But at least I ate the layer of dust off the top for you guys. Whew!" She gustily sighed. "We are way past a food change." While Cheetah was complaining Crescentpaw took the cue from Caracal's eyes that there was no more to be said on the matter.

Tinypaw scooted closer to her sister, about to open her jaws and whisper into her ear when Caracal caught sight of it and mewed, "your turn to eat, Tinypaw."

Tinypaw loped off. Cheetah took the opportunity to ask more about Starclan, because she hadn't gotten much chat about it before their long days of on-and-off agony. Crescentpaw tried to be patient as she explained but she was exploding to get out of there. Even though her missing claws tingled with pain they also tingled with unreleased energy.

Even after she ate her portion of kittypet food, it was much of the same. And yet it wasn't that long before the old woman woke up. It had just *felt* like it.

"Quiet! Don't make a sound... remember, we don't want her to fill the bowl yet." Caracal instructed while the apprentices fled to the bottom side of a dusty entertainment center. They squeezed underneath it, staying still as the Twoleg began to traverse the house. Cheetah hid close to her grand-cat, ready to distract the Twoleg when the time came.

As she passed through the room the lady stopped to turn on the light and search for the cats. After moving the curtain aside to gaze upon the windowsill, and then peering high up on the shelves with a craned hunch-backed neck, she gave up looking and shuffled into the kitchen.

"She should go outside to water the plants soon. Get ready," Caracal hissed urgently. Both apprentices faced towards the glass-paneled door several tail-lengths across from their hiding place. The faint light that the crystallized window let in was illuminating a shaft of rainbow onto the carpet.

When the old twoleg finally began walking back through the kitchen doorway, Crescentpaw tensed like she was waiting to

pounce on prey. She was astonished when just like the kittypets had predicted, the old Twoleg turned towards the doorway to put on some hefty boots. She tied the strings on them and then swung open the door. A hot blast of air swept inside and across the floor toward the cats.

That shaft of sunlight was more than worth the heat and humidity that it brought.

Caracal yowled. Cheetah meowed with a trill, her voice vibrating and screeching. The twoleg of course responded, delighted to see her cats. She turned around quicker than the apprentices thought possible and went to greet her pets.

The cats couldn't comprehend Twoleg speech but she was saying; "My, my! Are you tired of that old dry food? Would you like some nice wet food out of the cabinet? Do you like your new little kitty friends that I got just for you? Where are they hiding now?"

As the Twoleg rambled on and leaned down to pet her spotted kittypets, Crescentpaw and Tinypaw darted out of the open doorway and into the light.

Tinypaw

14

Crescentpaw and Tinypaw raced across the short-cropped grass, zooming into a yard adjacent to theirs and fleeing underneath the first enclosed area they saw. In front of the neighboring house was a thick line of bushes. As they plunged beneath them deep green leaves scattered onto their neck and backs.

"We need to get out of this area and farther from that Twoleg before she comes looking for us. We aren't safe yet," Crescentpaw gasped. Her high adrenaline was causing her to breathe faster than needed. Alarm bells were ringing in the apprentice's head, knowing that Twolegplace was a treacherous place to wander in.

Tinypaw was shivering and seemingly too nervous to respond. Her eyes were staring at the spindly bush roots before she finally looked up.

"How will we survive the Twolegplace without our claws? Or Riverclan's wetlands after that... Crescentpaw, we-"

"We'll have to discuss it later." She leaned forward to peer outside of the bush, even though it had only been a couple of heartbeats. With her heart pounding and blood rushing, Crescentpaw was ready to flee to the next cluster of bushes.

"We don't even know where to *go*!" Tinypaw hissed impatiently. "Stop trying to act and think for a second first."

But Crescentpaw wasn't listening. Instead, her eyes widened as she saw two lithe figures stream across the lawn, taking the same path they had just taken. They sliced through the grass like floating feathers, covering the ground in just a few strides. Light reflected off of their golden pelts, turning it yellow and blinding the apprentices in turn.

When Cheetah and Caracal reached them, they leaped on either side of the tabby-and-white she-cat, into the thick brush beneath the

Twoleg nest's overhanging windowsills. The smooth white panels of the house were just behind the bush-line, visible through the overhanging leaves. Tinypaw was backed against it with the soft black fur of her haunches flattened on one side.

"That's where we come in," Caracal announced placidly. "I'll do my best to get you out of the town."

She heard us from all the way over there. We need to keep our mews quieter.

Crescentpaw felt a bit skeptical, and exceedingly impatient at first. But she listened while Caracal told her plan.

"If we stuck to the fence-tops it would be safer. But since you don't have your claws we'll have to cross yards with cover like this. Underneath porches, through shrubbery and weed-clumps. Hopefully we smell the dogs outside before we see them." Tinypaw stiffened at the she-cats whispery mew.

"We'll look for kittypet scent as soon as we've left this area, and I'll ask them for advice in getting out of this Twolegplace." Carcal's golden eyes shimmered, framed by her shadowed, spotted-brown face.

But this plan isn't fool-proof. We could be very far away from the clans, if the twoleg usually picks up colony cats rather than clan cats. Even though she was aware of the dangers Crescentpaw came to the conclusion that it might be their only chance.

"We didn't know you planned to follow us," Tinypaw sounded annoyed, to which her kin flicked her tail at her in warning. But- of course she didn't see it. Or ignored it.

"Uh-sorry. It's nice of you to help us though. We have no idea how to reach the clans from here," Crescentpaw tried to save face.

Caracal nodded, her sleek pelt shaded with deep green beneath the bush's thick foilage. "You young cats deserve to get back to your clan. I'll help you along as far as I can, and follow the trail of kittypet advice back." Crescentpaw blinked at her with warmth and

thanks.

"And of course it's nice to see the sun," the grand-cat said brazenly, turning her neck to peer out beneath the bush. The mowed lawns were bathed in strong sunlight, and a heavy warmth swamped the air beyond.

Crescentpaw silently agreed. Even though all of the grass was confined to Twoleg yards it was a lot better being outside than in that shadowy nest. The few trees they could see were neatly clipped or confined with short-reaching branches. Barely a leaf stirred in the air.

"This is so fun, wow! I've never even been free outside before! Let alone with my new... *friends*..." Cheetah began with a gleeful mew, but it trailed off into a whisper as a quivering Twoleg voice cried out beyond their hideout.

"Quick, around the house and to the back of the yard. She's looking for us!"

It took half the day to get a comfortable distance away from the old woman's nest. After that the cats searched for a place that they could rest and collect their bearings. They found an old raccoon hole beneath a shed and unwound, then carried on looking for kittypet scent. Along the way Caracal told them about new words that she had heard other kittypets use frequently; like "road," "cars," and "trash cans." She said that Twoleg nests were traditionally called "houses," and kittypet food was "kibble" or "wet food." The apprentice wondered if these were learned Twoleg words, and when she asked Caracal nodded yes.

Tinypaw was completely uninterested in this banter. She trotted along quietly, being her usual shyer self.

It was near-sundown when the group found their first trace of cat scent. By this time Crescentpaw's pads were sore, and Tinypaw was

downright annoyed at Cheetah's endless enthusiasm.

"It smells like a tom went this way! I wonder if he has any kittypet food? I don't want to seem rude, but... I'm hungry already!"

Crescentpaw flicked her gaze towards the plump young she-cat uncertainly. She definitely sounded like she could never adjust to the harsh Leaf-Bares of clan life. Not that that had ever been an option, though.

When they came across the kittypet, Crescentpaw was surprised. It was a skinny elder who was sunning himself across his fence-top. She had expected a young, fat cat.

Then she considered them lucky that he was so old. Some other kittypets- younger ones, might've defended their tiny grass patch territories.

Crescentpaw and Tinypaw described the lake that they were looking for, and regretfully the tom shook his shaggy-furred head no. His collar bell tinkled as his whiskers swayed.

"I have no idea about a place like that, but the neighbor's housecat might know. She mentioned a place like that once, when I asked her where she'd came from." The tom leaned over the edge of the fence, teetering like he was about to jump down onto their side.

"She should still be outside at this time of day. But should stay and chat for a second. I've got some kibble inside to share." He lifted his long, feathery whiskers with eager delight.

"Sorry thanks but gotta go!" Crescentpaw lifted her fluffy tail and bounded away, through the short grass and around to the other side of the lawn.

"The *other* neighbor! Gosh, young cats have no patience- I swear." She heard him muttering as she swiveled in the opposite direction, picking up speed and racing past the other three cats.

Tinypaw, Cheetah and Caracal followed. They kept pace just a few strides behind her. As they crossed the fenceless yards they were swamped with a she-cat's strange, partly-kittypet scent. The

afternoon light burned down upon their shoulders with radiating warmth.

Tinypaw halted.

"Wait- Crescentpaw, don't we know that scent? It smells like..."

The larger sister halted and lifted her muzzle, parting her jaws and allowing the smell to better swathe her scent glands. As she inhaled, she could detect a familiar whiff amongst the kittypet's odor.

It was unmistakably the faint scent of Riverclan.

Which Riverclan cat do you think it is? If you don't know a guess, that's okay!

15

[image]

"Which cat is it? Why... how?" Tinypaw voiced just how confused Crescentpaw felt. Behind them, Cheetah was asking questions about why they'd stopped and who they were talking about. But just this one time Crescentpaw ignored her.

She lowered her head and shoulders and began creeping across the lawn, up to the house and near the front porch. When she heard no sound of twolegs she began circling towards the back of the massive den, inspecting the backyard fencetops.

But there was no cat on the fences. Behind the Twoleg nest was a flat expanse of rocky, squared-off terrain. The driveway habited two cars, one silver and one red. Atop the shorter red car was a she-cat, her bushy tail flicking as she lazed there with half-closed eyes.

It was a golden striped collared kittypet with sandy-white accents. Her ears were small and daintily framed her fluffy muzzle and face, which were coupled with two amber-orange eyes.

The she-cat looked exactly like Goldenheart. She didn't seem to catch sight of Crescentpaw at first, but when her companions rounded the house's edge she stood up with fright. Fur bushed, the medicine cat stepped off of the sun-baked car to join them in the silloute of shade. The smooth white cement beneath Crescentpaw caused her toes to prick with tenderness, but she ignored it while the kittypet halted.

"Hi, Tinypaw and Crescentpaw. Have you two joined a Twoleg nest nearby? It's lovely to see you again," she sounded innocent and polite as she approached them. As if nothing was out of the ordinary.

She's hiding the reaction that she had on top of the monster.

Crescentpaw's brows dropped as she stared challengingly at the

medicine cat. The sun scorched the bright, nourished grass out on the lawn behind them. Barely a cloud streaked the sky as all of the cats behind her stiffened.

"You were supposed to come back from the Moonpool, Goldenheart. Is this where you've been the entire time?" Crescentpaw didn't hide the accusation in her voice. She let it sit in the hot, still air between them until Goldenheart responded.

"That's none of your business." The yellow she-cat's mew was quick and flustered. Turning tail, she scrabbled her hind-paws against the concrete and fled. Crescentpaw was met with a spray of grit in her face.

"Wait!" She yowled, but it was no use. Goldenheart was racing for a flat side of the house, where she grabbed some ivy trendils. Snaking up the wall, she began to climb them.

Tinypaw and Crescentpaw bounded after her but it was Caracal that reached the bottom of the towering brick wall first. She craned her neck upward, reaching with her forepaws to yank Goldenheart down. When the she-call fell back down against the driveway, Caracal grabbed a thick mouthful of her fur, dragging her away from the Twoleg den by the scruff.

"Thought you'd run up to the roof, did ya? Not just yet, dearie. My companion apparently had a question that you haven't yet answered." Cheetah twitched her whiskers behind her grand-cat, approaching cautiously.

"WOW, Caracal! I never knew you could take down a cat that large!" She sounded envious.

As Crescentpaw crossed the sun-baked grass toward them, the medicine cat clawed and squirmed. Caracal released her but blocked the she-cat from fleeing back towards the house.

"Nah, she's all fur and fat. There's no muscle." The elderly spotted feline squinted at the two Riverclan apprentices as they approached. "I'm sure your friends could teach you a lot more about fighting than I can at my age."

Crescentpaw paused and swished her tail uncertainly, avoiding the spotted kin's gazes. She stepped around them and pushed into Goldenheart's personal space.

"Look, if you don't want to answer why you abandoned the clans at their worst time of need then so be it." She bit her tongue, looking away before fixating a quelling fiery gaze on her. "Just know that if Riverclan is still without a medicine cat, it's your fault." Crescentpaw stared down in disgust at the former clan cat turned kittypet. Already a shiny silver collar clutched the she-cat's striped golden neck, wrapped around it like a trophy.

"But you're going to tell us where the clans are to make up for that fact. *Tell us which direction,* Goldenheart." She let her mew turn hard and icy. It wasn't hard; she had used the same tactics with Tidepaw and the other bullies. Sure enough, Goldenheart shrank back. She knew that she could not win against two partly-trained apprentices and another pair of kittypets.

Her eyes flashed around their shoulders, but the other three were lined up behind the tabby-and-white apprentice. Waiting for her to attempt an escape.

Nervously, Goldenheart flattened her small cream-colored ears.

"Fine. But let me go after this and never return here. Don't tell the clans where I am or what I did, please! Just say you found my body or- or-" Clearly ashamed, Goldenheart rushed to find a solution that would aid her own avoidance.

"Yeah, sure we will. Now, what way is it- Kittypet?" Crescentpaw lashed her dark tabby tail.

How repulsive that any cat could abandon their clan for a life like this. It's against the warrior code! She wasn't going to let *her* clan die: she wasn't going to abandon *her* position. She wasn't going to turn tail and run away from some doltish wolves; not when only a few cats in Riverclan were her clan's last hope!

16

[image] [image]

"And do you remember the last gathering? Windclan said that they were only two paw-fulls of warriors strong. They'd only brought four clan members to the gathering that moon, save for Rainstar and his deputy."

Crescentpaw thoughtfully tilted her head towards Tinypaw as they discussed the last information they'd heard from the other clans. Cheetah listened from just behind. She was tired, though. After nearly three days straight of traversing Twolegplace, her paws were going numb. They'd hardly stopped to sleep either.

"Yes, but the memory is a bit fleeting. It was our first gathering, after all. We only got to attend one before the w-uh...."

"What's a gathering? You haven't told me about those before!" Cheetah piped up in the dual-eyed she-cat's silence, lifting her long spotty tail and sticking her dainty shoulders between them.

Crescentpaw leaned closer to tell her, while Tinypaw huffed at the invasion of space. "They're meetings where all of the five clans gather to share tongues and news. But we've stopped having them lately because- because..." she trailed off and tried to peer ahead, past the ferns and grasses. As if she had gotten distracted.

"What? Because WHAT?" Cheetah sounded super eager to know, and Crescentpaw sighed. She really didn't want to tell her.

Riverclan is so dangerous right now, and we've hardly told Cheetah about the realities of leafbare hunting and clan skirmishes. They'd felt no need to share the starving winters and sicknesses that could ail the clans, and the lack of prey when a random drought or flood occurred.

And we haven't told her anything about the wolves.

Tinypaw saved her. "Look! Look! Up there is the last Twoleg den. It's just some trees and fenced-in pastures beyond. The ones that lead to Horseplace!"

"Oh my Starclan, I'm so glad we can sleep under the stars tonight instead of under a dead Monster!" Crescentpaw's tail quivered with excitement. She missed having wild foilage to roam. She missed running beside clumps of fern and cattails, speeding along Riverclan's pebbly shore beds toward camp with a fish in her jaws. She even missed Aquasplash, her mentor. The cloudy grey sky seemed all the brighter up above.

But... my claws. With her fur now flushed, she squared her shoulders and stalked forward.

Tinypaw was right. Beyond the house they were about to overtake stood a small fenced-in cattle pasture lined with barbed wire. Beyond even that, a cluster of trees sloped sharply down into a lush prairie. As the trees tapered off the grass glowed golden-green and swayed against strong gusts of wind. Areas were squared off with large rectangles of low wooden fence, some containing dot-sized herds of cows with their heads bent to graze. And super far in the distance; but still visible to the cat's eye, was the distinct right-angled pastures of the Horseplace barriers. The lake was a blobby blue reflection of the sky above, barely a smear and distorted against the hazy horizon.

"Yes! Let's go. If we pick up the pace we could make it over halfway there by sunfall!" She bent her legs with anticipation, then straightened. Crescentpaw looked around, nodding at the two kittypets that stood awkwardly behind them.

"Let's cross the Thunderpath and make it to that Twoleg's back grass-patch, and then we'll say goodbye."

As they made their way over there, pausing for monsters along the way, the apprentices could tell that Cheetah was feeling dismal. Her ears flattened and she dragged her paws, hardly looking up as they crossed the path and then slunk around the house. Crescentpaw guided them past the cement back porch and underneath a giant metal ring. She had no way of knowing its name but it was a child's

trampoline.

Cheetah sat down in the taller unmowed grass with a deep frown. Caracal settled right next to her. Crescentpaw, too, laid down in the comfort of the screened shade. Clearly no sunlight had touched this grass since the Twolegs had placed the thing. The earth was cool against her belly, while the air was warm and still. Barely a lick of wind made it over the tall ring of unmowed grass surrounding them. Small yellow dandelion weeds were sprouted all around the yard, with a bee or two flying between them. One buzzed over her ears but they did not further bother the cats.

"Alright, we should be safe to head off from here. Now thank you two for helping us, but it's urgent that we get back to our clans. Don't worry about us, either. We would've been having our warrior assessments by now, if we hadn't of missed any training." Tinypaw turned her large eyes and ears towards Cheetah, mouth moving as she talked.

"I'm sure you kittypets are hungry so you can just be on your way back to your Twoleg now-... Oh come on." Tinypaw broke off and rolled her eyes as Cheetah burst into a gasp of emotion, her eyes watering and her neck-fur fluffed with dismay.

"I don't want to leave you guys though! I want to be with my new friends, doing new things and seeing new things and- well, *new things!* I'm tired of being a pet-kitty that's stuck inside all day. I want to be a warrior like you guys are going to be. We could do it together!" Her mew was shrill and protesting.

"Slow down," Tinypaw interjected, still looking irritated. Crescentpaw could understand her side, but she had hoped her sister could be more sympathetic. She kept quiet while they spoke, no longer fretting over the missed time.

"For starters you'd have to go through a full apprenticeship from start to finish. We, however- are nearly at the very end of ours. And you becoming an apprentice isn't an option anyways!"

"But you can't just leave me behind. I would never leave *you guys* behind."

"You just met us!" Her jet-black sister snapped. Crescentpaw swept her tail in an arch through the grass impatiently.

Cheetah was clearly stung by the retort, because it took her unusually long to reply. When she did she weakly croaked "Yeah. But I want to go to Riverclan and make more friends, and I want to become *best* friends with you guys."

"Ugh... Look. Even though you're very naive we *do* like you, Cheetah," Tinypaw said while looking like she very much didn't, her lip curled condescendingly. Crescentpaw almost rolled her eyes at the lie. *Tinypaw has a funny way of showing how she likes somebody*.

"It's just that Kittypets can't be warriors. They're like unaccustomed to eating live prey and living outside."

"But I could! I tried a mouse that Caracal killed from down in the basement once. It wasn't that bad." Crescentpaw winced. "And I've slept outside for the past two nights! I don't even mind the fleas or anything."

Oof. Cheetah's replies weren't exactly helping her case.

"But our leader would never accept you two."

The tabby-and-white apprentice sighed, knowing that was true. Smallsparrow must've been named Smallstar by now, and even he wouldn't accept two kittypets into the clan. It was simply in too dire of a state to focus on training two kittypets right now.

"Then I'll talk to the leader myself. I'll make him see that I'm warrior material." Cheetah sounded determined, as Crescentpaw's ears flicked up in astonishment.

"Pfft! You what-You can't!" Tinypaw's flabbergasted stupor was interrupted by Cheetah's squeal. She leaped over the cat's backs beneath the trampoline, rounding back anytime she came close to the coiled overhang. She kept running, clearly exuberant at her own new idea.

"It seems you can't stop her," Crescentpaw grinned, as her argumentative sister shot her a look.

By making that decision Cheetah had reminded her of herself. Who cared what other cats thought? It was time to act, not wait and see.

As Crescentpaw laid there she looked down at her own fluffy white chest-fur. It needed a good grooming again. Far less concerned about this than Tinypaw was, she looked over at Caracal.

"Are you going to join Riverclan, too?"

Caracal

17

[image] [image]

Caracal had seemed like a capable adult cat for the entirety of their travels. Though she'd ran out of breath a few times along the way, the she-cat had never dropped too far behind or relented in helping where she was needed. Her spotted pelt rolled over her stretched shoulders as she crossed her forepaws.

"No, but I won't be going back to my housefolk either. In fact I think I'll be staying at that cluster of trees between here and your Lake." She nodded past the sloping ridge, down to the thick tree-tops that shone emerald green beneath a blazing sun.

It was reassuring to be able to see so far from right here. Crescentpaw knew that when they climbed down their vision of the lake would be cut off. They'd have to remember their direction; and so she took record of the position of the light, then responded.

"That seems nice. It seemed like you had missed the daylight."

"You've no idea, young 'un." Caracal's grunted as she looked down at the much younger she-cat.

"You three have such potential. Support Cheetah while I'm not there. If she gets rejected or ever goes hungry, send her back to me. And one more thing..." she leaned closer, until Crescentpaw could smell her kittypet-food breath.

"What's this thing being kept from us about your clans? Some sort of danger that cuts your words off each time you're about to mention it." She lifted an eyebrow suspiciously, her gaze suddenly questioning and sharp as flint.

"Will they throw you out because you've lost your hunting claws?"

Crescentpaw avoided her intimidating gaze for a moment, then turned her fluffy face back towards the grand-cat. "Well- yes, they

might." She looked at the grass stems between their paws, almost scared to admit her clan's weaknesses aloud.

"But the real problem is that-.... There are... *wolves*, in our camp. Every few nights or so. They're like dogs, but larger. They come to hunt us in little groups or pairs, unless it's the daytime and it's a lone wolf. A nursing queen was killed that way one morning, while stretching her legs close to the camp walls." Crescentpaw had to correct herself at the end.

Really, the wolves showed up at random half the time. It could be a quarter-moon without seeing them, if they were lucky. Or the wolves could show up every other night. It variated, and no cat knew why.

"No one has been able to communicate with Starclan in... no cat knows how long. Because the Moonpool- our connection to Starclan, that is," she took a breath. "Is remote and a good way's travel from the Clans. None of the other warrior clans seem to know where the wolves live or primarily hunt because we've become so isolated from one another. So when some cat *does* travel to the Moonpool, they don't know where or when an attack will come from." She shivered as she felt adrenaline set her fur on end. Adjacent to them, Tinypaw and Cheetah were arguing so fluidly that they weren't listening to a word of their conversation.

"Well- oh, my." Caracal reacted just as Crescentpaw would've expected. Her brows rose, and she stepped back with her ears flattened. "That... nearly changes things." Her eyes stared over Crescentpaw's head and at Cheetah's expressive figure as she rambled.

"If you don't want to let Cheetah go with us now, I understand." Caracal refocused her gaze onto the apprentice before her, but it was still just as dire.

"No, Cheetah can do what she wants regardless. I can't control her. But this just makes it harder for me to be happy for her doing it. I don't want her to be killed for some far-fetched adventure experience."

Crescentpaw frowned. "The clans aren't an experience. They're permenant."

"Well, no offense gal', but it sounds like they might not be for much longer. Ya'll just make sure to come see me within a few moon's time. I'll stay at the edge of the tree-line until then."

The black-tabby-and-white apprentice nodded. "Okay, we will. And we'll be back far before then if Smallstar doesn't accept her." A beetle crawled across a grass stem, then onto her paw. Crescentpaw twitched it off. "But mind you, I hope he does," she added as Caracal nodded.

"Does that mean you're coming with us to those trees?"

"Actually, no." The older she-cat sounded thoughtful. She perked her rounded ears back towards the Thunderpath that they had just crossed.

"I'm going to find some housefolk food to eat first. I think I smelled a kittypet's scent on that last third yard we skirted. After all, I'll have to learn to hunt in that swathe of trees once I reach it. *Cheetah*!" The elderly she-cat raised her voice. "Come say goodbye!"

"No!" Cheetah shouted, pouting- but dragging her paws towards Caracal anyways.

"We're not saying bye to anyone, we're going with them!" She opened her mouth wide to exclaim, spiky teeth flashing. Crescentpaw grinned and joined her friend at the shoulder.

"Oh you're not saying goodbye, honey. I am." Her grand-kit snapped her mouth closed at once, listening intently.

"I'll be waiting at the base of that forested hill, on the north-facing edge of the treeline. You go and see what Clan life's like, dear. Maybe if they accept you, who knows." She winked. "They might one day accept me, too." Cheetah looked unhappy about her grandcat staying behind, but perked up at that last bit.

"Right! I'll show them what a housecat can do, Caracal! Then they'll have to accept you as well!" Her eyes shone as she looked up, and

her kin in turn looked proudly down at her. Crescentpaw waited, her tail stiffening as she tried not to feel jealous of their close parental bond.

"Exactly. Now, I won't slow you younger cats down. That's why ya'll can go along ahead of me. I'll see you three in... say, two moon's time?"

"Alright," Crescentpaw agreed, and was faintly surprised when Caracal leaned forward to touch noses with each of them, including Tinypaw. Tinypaw awkwardly leaned forward, booped the adult cat's large muzzle, then backed away quickly. Crescentpaw couldn't gague whether she was unappreciative of the older cat, or just too eager to get back to the clan.

"Thank you, Caracal. You're very generous and you were so kind to us. It won't be long before we see you again and I promise I'll keep Cheetah-"

"Don't make a promise you aren't sure of, honey. Cheetah and I know the risks of being out here. We ain't mindless soft-paws." She lifted one side of her lip, smirking. "So go ahead, show my grand-kit a different way of life. I hope she loves all that it has to offer. And I hope you can save those Clans of yours too."

Crescentpaw nodded, and the three cats stalked out from beneath the trampoline. They timidly checked for Twolegs and dogs before they went. Then they bolted into a run down the angled grassy hill, splashed through a thin hackle-deep creek, and disappeared into the gnarled undergrowth beneath the trees.

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Questionnaire: What would you want Crescentpaw's warrior name to be?

_____

Cheetah

18 🌙

[image][image]

◐ 11.7 Moons Old ◐

The moon was half-full that evening, pale and ivory above a luminescent blanket of waving switchgrass. The two apprentices wondered if anyone was currently at the Moonpool. Maybe a medicine cat from another clan had tried their luck tonight and made it there. What a profound hope that was.

As they pushed their travels quite farther into dusk they discussed the threat of the wolves with Cheetah. She listened patiently and was mostly silent, which Crescentpaw thought was uncharacteristic of her.

The last night before the trio of she-cats reached Clan territory they shared a nest among the roots of a lone elder tree. Before settling, Crescentpaw had caught a wood mouse with just her *jaws* in the same relative area. They had been feeding on fallen seeds in the gathering evening. Underneath a purple twilit sky, she had snatched one up and thanked the Starclan warriors above.

Wow. I would've thought hunting impossible.

But learning how to do that was initially difficult. She'd first lost a starling by instinctively trying to jump on it with her foreclaws. The second piece of prey, a squirrel feeding on the moonlight-dappled forest floor, had moved too quickly for her to grasp with her teeth. Turning back towards their makeshift den, she had taken a different path and found the exposed mice amongst the scattered leaf-litter.

She'd have to learn to improve it on her own, and tell Tinypaw the tips later. At least she'd found out that she *could* catch something. (If only mice, and on the third try.)

Crescentpaw knew she would have serious problems for herself if she couldn't hook a fish with her forepaws. Riverclan's main source

of prey was trout and carp.

Worry about that later. Just like she'd told Tinypaw to do.

Falling asleep had been easy. Walking across the pastures had taken up most of their day. When she woke the next morning she found her muscles refreshed and exuberant. Her paws had completely stopped hurting over the past three days; and now, even if she ran as hard as she could, the empty sheathes no longer hurt.

As the young she-cats set off again Cheetah began rambling with her profound illusion that all of the Clan cats would love her. That they would *have* to, because all she simply wanted was to help out and be friends with everybody! It was almost as though she was reassuring herself. And soon enough Tinypaw got tired of hearing it.

"Can you hush? We've only got a bit longer until we get there, and I can't even be excited to see my clan through your rambling!" Agitated, Tinypaw fluffed out her thin black tail.

"Besides, you can't just chatter on so loudly like that! There's prey and wolves out here, you know. And sometimes they attack at daylight instead of pre-dawn. You need to be paying attention to your surroundings. Scenting the air and listening behind you!" She spat.

"Hopefully you'll have a mentor to teach you all of that soon," Crescentpaw tried to help diverge the negative atmosphere.

"That's the least of our worries, Crescentpaw. We can't even climb a tree if the wolves come. Have you really thought this out?" Tinypaw mewed, halting and then swaggering back to her taller sister on small paws.

"You realize that we could be taking Cheetah back to her death as well as our own? This is serious, not a quest to *make new friends."*

Crescentpaw smiled nervously at her friend over her kin's shoulders. But then Tinypaw shot up and into her eye frame, locking gazes with her. "Don't you see that we could be kicked out the second we walk in? We'll never become warriors if they find out! And walking

into camp with a kittypet as well as our missing claws... what we usually catch FISH WITH- is crazy!" She spat, her thin shoulders shaking. "This is all crazy," Tinypaw sighed with frustration and turned away. She rarely took her anger out on others for very long, if at all.

"I understand that, sister. I'm stressed too. And I know what we're walking back into. But you've got to stop taking it out on Cheetah. *She* doesn't understand what she's getting into until *she* sees it," Crescentpaw pointed out. Tinypaw whipped her head back towards their traveling kittypet companion. Her long spotted neck was stretched toward them.

"Yeah. I sure hope you're ready to see what a wolf is really like," her littermate mewed dryly, but Cheetah did not respond. Her eyes were wide, curious, and apprehensive at the same time.

"For now we'll try to avoid telling our mentors; at least until we figure out if Smallstar is going to accept Cheetah." Crescentpaw blinked her yellow-and-blue eyes at her spotted friend. "That means don't tell any cat that our claws were taken by the Twoleg yet. Don't even mention it to *us*, unless we bring it up first- and in private."

"Okay." Cheetah nodded quickly. The dark spots around her face accentuated her long, tapered muzzle.

However, she sort of looked strange. Something about her markings were unlike any clan cat's pelt she had ever seen. Caracal had mentioned something about bloodlines and having all spotted-cat kin. *Oh well. Maybe she'll be popular for it. Maybe the clan has a teeny tiny chance of accepting her, at least for the fact that we need more cats to help defend the camp.*

Crescentpaw then felt like she was kidding herself. *Any level-headed Riverclan leader would deny a kittypet's request to join right now.* Despite that little follow-up thought in the back of her mind, she carried on padding through the wild and overgrown grasses. The sun was baking the fur atop her head and back, but she hardly minded. Her paw pads were sweating through the earth to cool her down, and she could pant if she so desperately needed to.

"After this forking Thunderpath we'll be coming up on the Horseplace!" Crescentpaw announced, keeping her head high and eyes sharp on the land ahead. She stiffened when she heard a dog bark from close to the road, then realized it must have been from inside of a Monster. *Poor dog.*

"Right, no worries." They continued on at a slower pace, then halted at the fork in what Caracal called a 'road.' With Tinypaw's detection of vibrations through the pavement, and Crescentpaw's keen eyes trying to look both ways at once, they safely crossed it. Though Cheetah kept conversing, the apprentices were too excited to remember what she'd said. Tinypaw mostly ran ahead of them, but her long black tail was easy to follow.

As a deep-citrus sunset began to stain the horizon they finally passed Riverclan's borders. Tabby-and-white Crescentpaw expected a patrol to stop them along the way; even if it had been a small one of only two or three cats. But there was none.
Reassuringly, though, multiple riverclan clanmates' scents swamped the familiar worn patrol paths. They glided over the trodden-down grass and bounded beside overhanging foilage. Skirting some rocky outcrops, the three cats leaped the stream and skulked under the pooling shadows of huge willow trees. Cheetah stepped on twigs and knocked her knees against the terrain the entire way there, stumbling through grass clumps and over termite mounds.

"It's going to be great if they let you become a Riverclan apprentice, Cheetah!" Crescentpaw wanted to encourage her enthusiasm for the proposal. "You'll get a mentor and learn how to hunt, and we'll help you learn all the newbie battle moves that we've learned." She lifted her head high, determined not to show any doubt.

Besides. If Smallstar argues, I'll vouch for her. She's definitely got the determination for what it takes. The least we can do is ask.

"That's amazing! When do you guys think you'll be warriors?" Tinypaw stopped and tossed her head over one shoulder, looking at her kin. Crescentpaw met her eye levely and found worried anguish there. She felt it, too.

"Well... we'll get an assessment as soon as possible. That's another

thing we have to ask about," Crescentpaw said with so much uncertainty that she nearly abandoned the sentence. She dejectedly watched as Tinypaw gave a nimble nod. Deep down, both sisters knew that their assesment could be the end of the road for them. If and when their mentors found out about their claws, they'd tell Riverclan's leader. And he might either re-assign them to medicine cat roles or banish them from the clan completely.

What use is a cat without its claws? Juggling such negative and comparably optimistic thoughts were tiring. And yet she lifted her head and tail high, pushing away the doubts. Maybe if they were lucky nothing would go wrong.

"It's sad that we would've had our pre-assessment training already, if that stupid Twoleg hadn't of caught us in a trap." Tinypaw sneaked a look over at Cheetah, as if expecting her to get offended. But the other she-cat simply trotted through the sun washed grasses, the wind tugging at her gold-and-black ears.

"Smells like it'll rain soon," Crescentpaw changed the subject. "Let's pick up the pace. We're almost there."

The tabby-and-white apprentice hadn't needed to say anything. The she-cats were mere minutes away from the heart of Riverclan. They approached the most well-trodden path that led up to the barrier entrance, and spotted Alpinefog on guard.

As they fully emerged from around a clump of seagrass Alpinefog's jaw fell slack.

Some of the characters we've seen so far

19 🌙

[image]
[image]

The warrior's thick grey-and-white fur was unkempt and clumpy. Moss from his nest was still stuck in his fur. Crescentpaw strolled up with the two other she-cats behind her, while Alpinefog's pale green eyes stretched wide.

"Oh, great Starclan! I can't believe it." He blinked rapidly. The fiery incandescent sun burning behind them reflected in his lime-green gaze.

"Tinypaw and Crescentpaw-... Well uh, this is a problem." Alpinefog kept looking uncertain about seeing them back, which caused her hackles to rise. A cool breeze stirred through Riverclan's forest, cool and refreshing against the swell of sunset heat. Crescentpaw's whiskers were pulled against her face.

Tinypaw's fur flushed, and she immediately took a step back with an *I Knew It* expression on her face. But her kin blocked her with a sheathed paw extended, asking, "Wait. What do you mean?" There's no way that Alpinefog had noticed their missing claws that quickly. In fact, their paws looked normal as far as outside appearance. (You can't see a cat's claws if they're sheathed, whether they have any or not.)

"It's not your decision to make about Cheetah."

Alpinefog fog looked confused, then bent around them to look at the kittypet, who was shyly standing back at the sight of such a big warrior.

"No, I-. Whoever she is, we can deal with that later. The problem is that you two ran off to be kittypets!" Alpinefog sounded cross like he had never been with them before. His muzzle twisted into a condescending, distasteful frown.

"WHAT!?" Crescentpaw yowled, looking him up and down with revulsion.

"Who told you that?" She demanded, and even before he said it she was hearing the answer in her own head.

"Rowanpaw," he stated smoothly, but didn't lose the stern glint in his now-slitted eyes. "We needed you two so badly over this past half-moon. And you were off begging after Twolegs, being Kittypets!" He didn't stand up from where he sat beside the fronds. However, Alpinefog swiveled his head to look over at her littermate with just as much contempt.

"We were not!" Tinypaw sputtered, her small muzzle pulled back in a defensive snarl. She defended herself against her mentor's accusations. Crescentpaw curled her own muzzle against her chest, arching her neck defiantly and doing the same.

"Well- if you weren't then your sister has some explaining to do. Either way, get inside camp. I told Rowanpaw to eat before we go out to train. It's Emberfawn's turn to take watch anyway." He expertly scanned the forest, inhaling with a glance over the higher-growing foliage. Then, figuring the camp could remain unguarded for a moment, Alpinefog followed the young she-cats in to better hear the drama that was about to unfold.

Their lifted tails dragged against the entryway's broken-apart woven willow branches, while the cool drooping evergreen vines scraped their ear-tips. Some of the trendils were torn off and trampled into pieces beneath the cat's paws. When Crescentpaw was out of the entry tunnel and partway to the center of camp, she halted with dismay.

The thick swathes of reed and clumps of fern that had lined Riverclan's walls were compressed into old mud or shredded apart. They no longer waved and swished around the perimeter of camp, providing a comforting privacy screen from the rest of the oak-and-willow tree forest. Instead, she could see past the thin stick barrier and into the sunlit-wild growing grasses of their territory beyond. Most of dens too looked ravished and sagging. The elder's den was completely caved in on itself, with sticks and debris sitting inside of

it.

"How did the camp get like this?" Crescentpaw turned around before reaching the fresh-kill pile surrounded by cats, but they had already seen and heard her. She watched them pad up with mixed signals. Their shadows stretched far in the evening light, as Cheetah and Tinypaw bunched up behind her.

"The wolves," Alpinefog muttered darkly, flipping his thick foggy-grey tail to the side. "And a lack of warriors available to fix it."

That's not good. How many more were lost since we got captured?

"Where is Smallstar?" Tinypaw asked as Emberfawn, a young red tomcat, sniffed at Cheetah's tail-tip.

"Dead." Rowanpaw didn't care to elaborate, as she padded around the surrounding cats and up to her mentor's shoulder.

Crescentpaw gasped, her jaw falling slack with shock. *Did he lose all his nine lives at once?* Or had he never officially become leader? She wanted to react to both her sister's appearance and the clan deputy's death, but just then another cat cut in.

"She smells like kittypet!" Emberfawn exclaimed, though he sounded more surprised than scornful. He turned to Crescentpaw and flattened his dark brown ears. His green eyes were accusatory.

"So it's true... you two *did* run away to become kittypets!" Tinypaw reeled back behind her, bewildered.

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" She asked, hissing at the tom. Exasperated, Crescentpaw turned on Quietdew, a grey-and-white warrior who was sizing up Cheetah with squared shoulders.

"Leave her alone!" Stepping closer, the apprentice snapped her teeth agressively close to Quietdew's ear. The older she-cat backed off, and Crescentpaw felt no sympathy for startling her. *Try it again and she'll get more than just a warning!* With dual-colored eyes smoldering she stayed planted beside Cheetah.

She tried to sink her claws into the earth to calm herself, but no

claws slid out. *Oops. Better not do that again. Some cat might notice.* She glanced around at the others cautiously.

"First of all, how did Smallsparrow die? Did he ever become Smallstar?" Crescentpaw interrogated. "If he didn't, WHO is the new clan deputy- or leader, because we need to tell *them* what happened first." She swiveled her head towards each cat in turn.

"If we don't then every cat will keep arguing!"

She felt something like surprise when she realized all of them were looking at her. As the temperature dropped into a more comfortable range the crickets began their melodious chirping. The breeze tugged on their whiskers in the blue pre-evening. Any second now the first raindrops would begin to fall. And the sun, dipping just behind the treetops, said its farewell for the day.

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Cheetah

20 🌙

[image] [image]

"It's a long story, so if you're hungry then grab some prey." Alpinefog mewed forlornly.

"Don't feed kittypets. Prey is scarce enough as it is!" Quietdew snapped, looking over at her son Emberfawn with a heavily suggestive tone. *She's trying to become a Riverclan apprentice, so clearly she isn't a kittypet anymore!* Crescentpaw made sure that she *visibly* rolled her eyes at the commanding she-cat's mouse-dung choice of words.

The young warrior however ignored her, doing so anyways. He got up to get a piece of prey for them and dropped it near Cheetah's paws. Nervously, Cheetah's huge yellow eyes rounded as she looked at the fish and then back over at him. "Thank you! I have never tried fish before! It looks kind of slimy, but cool!" She meowed loudly, while Quietdew bitterly narrowed her eyes.

Alpinefog clawed tufts of moss out from his coat while waiting for them all to settle. Clearing his throat, he began.

"The night that you *left*," Crescentpaw immediately opened her jaws to argue, then decided she definitely needed to hear at least the next part before interrupting. "-Smallsparrow was killed by the jaws of a wolf. We once again had no body to mourn or bury. They ate him here in camp." The other warriors were silent, not an ear twitching or a tail swishing.

"The killings kept happening, and that's why you don't see a few warriors here among us today." He paused, and the cats around them looked on with disturbed expressions. Rowanpaw's muzzle crinkled with unpleasant memories.

"Tidepaw, Chaosclaw's apprentice. And Aquasplash, your mentor."

Crescentpaw flinched. *Not Aquasplash!* Her mentor had been closer

to a friend than a teacher. And that many cats was a huge blow to the clan. Her eyes burned with remorse as she stared at the scarred clan members. Emberfawn's ears were shredded. One was nearly completely ripped in two. Alpinefog's muzzle was slashed deep by wolf teeth. And Rowanpaw had a scab healing on her side, as well as missing fur all over her previously-uniform tail.

Quietdew stepped closer, and Crescentpaw had to lean away as she saw it. The she-cat's eye was grotesque. The wound was seemingly healing, but it was half raw with dried blood and torn-apart flesh. She hadn't noticed it initially since it was beneath Quietdew's left eyelid, where a patch of dark grey fur blended in with most of the wound.

"I got this just last night. You're lucky ya'll weren't here before that."

The dark tabby she-cat thought about how they'd shared that teeny mouse and slept beneath a rooted cavity in a too-small nest they that they had built together. And that whole time her clan had been hunted. *From the moment we left, Riverclan has been in even greater danger.*

"But that's the only cats we've lost *in battle*, right? This can't be what's left of the clan," Tinypaw meowed loudly from the edge of the crowd, where she was now ripping into the remains of the fish Cheetah had shyly nibbled at.

Crescentpaw knew what she meant. Had their other clanmates left to be kittypets like Goldenheart?

"Ah, no. Raccoonstripe is resting off a sprained paw in the warriors den. He's exhausted after yesterday's patrols. And Houndspots is out hunting with Lagoonstripe," Alpinefog explained. "They'll be back soon."

Crescentpaw still frowned. That wasn't very many cats left in Riverclan, though. And no queens, kits or elders had been named in the past paw-full of moons. "I'm sure Houndspots will be happy to see his apprentice again, once you explain to us what it is you were supposedly doing in Twolegplace." The clouds were thick and knotted together behind Alpinefog's blocky head.

Behind her, Tinypaw shuffled her paws. There was no denying the trace of Twolegplace that they had carried back with them. Cheetah still sat by the fish bones that Tinypaw had picked clean.

"We were captured!" The crescent-marked apprentice turned her head towards Rowanpaw as she hissed. "Rowanpaw, didn't you tell them what happened?"

Her chestnut-furred sister's initial reaction was to look bashful. As Crescentpaw watched she found that her kin's behavior was strange. Instead of answering outright, she looked at the other cats with exasperation.

Clearly the brown she-cat was hiding something. And as Crescentpaw stalked towards her sister to force it out of her, Rowanpaw's eyes flashed with worry before she exclaimed "I- I panicked!" She fidgeted, flattening her ears and looking over at her kin. "I told the Clan that you guys ran off to be kittypets because I didn't want them to think I couldn't save you. I-I didn't want them to think it was my fault that you were trapped." Her eyes were round with pleading innocence.

"My assesment was supposed to be soon, remember?" Rowanpaw specified as if that made more sense. *What a lousy excuse.*

"How does that even relate?" The larger tabby-and-white apprentice argued.

"*Our* assesment," Tinypaw corrected as she moved through the small group of watching warriors. The stretching shadows had disappeared, replaced by a dark wash of stunted moonlight. The lithe black she-cat blended into the vegetation behind them. As night settled, the clouds above only grew heavier with rain, crossing over the moon and distorting its rays.

"We're the same age, you know! And by the way, that looks horrible on us!" She stopped beside Crescentpaw, both she-cats now glaring at Rowanpaw from a few tail-lengths away.

"How were you both captured?" Emberfawn asked before the she-cats could *really* start arguing.

"We-uh... found a mesh box with some prey in it. Beside the Twoleg-path where they set up pelts in Greenleaf." She sighed, ashamed. "Then a Twoleg came and took the box after we got stuck inside. She brought us to her Twoleg nest and that's where we were trapped for most of the time."

"Rowanpaw, the reason you gave doesn't give you a right to lie." Alpinefog groaned as he prepared to lecture his apprentice, rising to his paws.

"I know we were supposed to go train, but it seems the afternoon has gotten away from us. And you've clearly got some explaining to do amongst your kin." His pale green eyes were lit with confound shame. "Go ahead and chat with them while I fetch Lagoonstripe and Houndspots. They'll want to hear about this." Alpinefog's deep mew was stern as he directed Rowanpaw closer to her sisters.

The brown she-cat looked apprehensive, following just behind her mentor's shoulder and dragging her paws. After a moment Alpinefog turned away and mewed "Emberfawn. It's your turn to stand guard. Give them some time to catch up before our other warriors return, and then we can all discuss again."

"When did we start standing guard during the day?" Crescentpaw called to Emberfawn's retreating hindquarters as he moved toward the camp entrance. Alpinefog's fluffy grey tail disappeared, whisking behind the lichen as he exited.

"Right after Smallsmarrow was killed." Emberfawn turned back to look at her. Though his expression was clear, the dark ginger tom's words were heavy.

Smallsparrow was his father! She threw him a sympathetic glance and mewed a thank you before he left.

Crescentpaw sat in contemplation about her destroyed clan for a moment. She was so troubled by their lack of a leader, medicine cat, and deputy now; that she immediately began trying to problem solve.

But all of her ideas seemed too far-fetched. And she kept thinking of

bad ones as the clouds broke open, and slanted rain finally began to fall. Her tabby fur grew sodden within seconds.

Maybe send another cat to the Moonpool to commune with Starclan?

Bad idea... it had always failed before. They either arrived back injured or didn't come back at all. She thought of Goldenheart, their previous medicine-cat turned kittypet. She had abandoned her clan in return for a life without fear of the wolves.

Too bad we can't just move all of the Clan territories. We don't have Starclan's approval for anything like that. Her whiskers began dripping beneath the heavy overflowing cloud-water. Droplets slid down her forehead and muzzle, plopping onto the ground with a gentle patter.

We could just elect a temporary leader and medicine cat from within the clan ourselves. Like, now.

Crescentpaw's thoughts took off with the prospect. Her paws tingled at the idea of becoming a warrior, then deputy, then *clan leader.* She had secretly relished the idea of becoming such an important cat in the clan one day. She had even *yearned* for it.

But of course that idea sounded horrible within mere seconds of its arrival. *Cutting out Starclan like that just feels so wrong... it's against Clan tradition, and disrespectful*. She sighed as she heard her sisters start arguing beside her.

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Crescentpaw

21 🌙

[image] [image]

"Oh, hush about the Twoleg trap thing. Can't you see that mouse has already fled, and there's worse things to worry about now?" Rowanpaw's words came into focus as Crescentpaw pricked her ears to listen. The white moon-shaped mark on her face was spiky and distorted from the thin rain that was falling.

"We'll never get our warrior names!" The brown she-cat complained loudly, flicking water droplets from her ear tips. "There's no deputy or leader to elect us as one, let alone a medicine cat to get us either one of *those* either!"

Crescentpaw could understand both sides, but she hadn't yet had a proper greeting with Rowanpaw. She attempted to nose-touch her kin but the other apprentice turned her face. *She's too upset right now. She won't even say hello!* Crescentpaw tried not to feel stung from such disregard.

"I don't want to be stuck as an apprentice forever, and *die* as one. Like Tidepaw did!" She snuck a look back over at them, her expression snide. As if she didn't expect them to understand a word of it.

But Crescentpaw *did*. She moved closer and pressed her tabby-and-white fur into her sister's smoother pelt. Rowanpaw, who had never been a fan of sharing tongues or any physical contact for that matter, moved away after a second.

It was mostly Tinypaw that noticed- but so far their cinnamon-brown relative had hardly even shown that she was glad they'd come back. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Crescentpaw tried to catch Rowanpaw's eye but she was avoiding their gazes again.

Their estranged sister had always been aloof from their kin-despite

any other cat's attempts to let her in. But this was as strange as ever... like complete avoidance to them specifically.

"It's alright Rowanpaw. We aren't mad at you. And I'll figure out what to do to fix the clan."

Crescentpaw was startled when her sister laughed in her face and then grunted "You? Yeah, sure. Let me know when you figure something out." She twitched her long, dripping whiskers with amusement.

Stunned and offended, Crescentpaw's hackles flung up. Her tail flicked to-and-fro as she hung onto her patience. Which by the way, was not very characteristic of her.

"Oh, shut your breathing hole. Crescentpaw has the best chance of doing anything about this than any other cat does, and you know it." Tinypaw's eyes were beseeching as she arched her paw expressively, lecturing her arrogant chestnut sister.

That set Rowanpaw off even father. Her eyes blazed as her tail lashed before she bared her teeth in a snarl. Crescentpaw leaped into a defensive stance, expecting her to attack. But she didn't; she just lowered her head and stomped away. The brown she-cat's claws were ripping up wet tufts of grass as she left.

"Wow. It's like anything you say gets her going. I didn't even say anything about *her*!" Tinypaw exclaimed, clutching her chest with a paw innocently.

"No, I know." Crescentpaw agreed, throwing a look in the direction that Rowanpaw had retreated. "It isn't your fault." The blue-and-yellow eyed she-cat sighed. "I wasn't done talking to her, though. Maybe I'll try again later."

Tinypaw scoffed. "Yeah, *much* later. Can you believe she lied about us like that?

Oh, and didn't you want any fresh-kill?" She changed the subject to avoid the negativity, to which Crescentpaw was grateful. Nodding, she padded over to the fresh-kill pile. The young she-cat halted,

noticing Cheetah regretfully with one flattened ear.

"Er, sorry Cheetah. I kind of forgot you were standing there waiting..."

"It's okay!" She meowed cheerfully, kneading her paws. "I could tell that there was some *sisterly tension*~ going on, and I don't understand what it was about so I just stood back and kind of listened."

Tinypaw stretched out one side of her face in a half-frown.

"And I was thinking maybe I shouldn't listen, but then I realized that I should." She rushed to defend herself after seeing Tinypaw's look.

"Because I want to know more about these cats if they're going to be my new friends! And, like, a lot of them seem super not-grumpy so I bet they all will be!" Cheetah's huge round ears accentuated her bulging golden eyes. Even as raindrops rain fell upon her head and shoulders the spotted she-cat looked comfortable in the Riverclan camp. Over here, the willow tree's broad leaves sheltered them from the worst of the wet.

Of course, Crescentpaw tried to explain that the warriors expected a different standard of, uh- *expression*. When it came to living in the forest, that is. Cheetah nodded and did her best to listen, but she kept getting distracted by the dens and broken up stick-wall around camp.

"That wall looks all dingy and fallen apart! I could help fix it, if you want," she meowed loudly to no cat in particular. Emberfawn poked his head into camp from his guard post outside, looked at them with round green eyes, and then retreated.

"Cheetah, remember that we have to speak quietly in these wetlands." Crescentpaw tried to sound mature as she repeated herself. "Prey is fluttering in the trees beyond the camp walls. Even fish in the streams that run adjacent to us can hear a yowl like that." She laughed and stretched out a white paw to calm her friend.

"Haha. Right." Cheetah said in a more chilled-out demeanor, then smiled ear to ear.

Her mentor is going to love her. The crickets in the tall wet grass sang behind them. The twisting, winding tree-trunks around them were slick and shiny with wet bark.

She remembered her own beloved mentor, who had trained her all the way up to eleven moons. Aquasplash had been a patient and seasoned warrior. Crescentpaw's eyes began glistening as she thought of her mentor, her father, her leader, and then her deputy. All taken by the wolves, or wounds that the wolves had inflicted.

The clans were accustomed to ailments like illness, natural disasters and local predators. They had chased out rogues, foxes, badgers and even stoats. And yet not a single one had cut down- *halved*, Riverclan's numbers like this.

"Hey, your Warrior friends are here!" Cheetah announced, pointing her tail to the emerging Alpinefog, Houndspots, and Lagoonstripe. Two of the returning warriors held swinging prey in their jaws, dropping it when they saw her and Tinypaw. Emberfawn followed them in from behind, leaving his post. He ran into the warriors den to fetch Raccoonstripe.

Lagoonstripe then signaled the other cats around the camp towards her, long striped tail waving. Rowanpaw emerged from the apprentices den alone. Quietdew padded out of the medicine cat's den, and Crescentpaw wondered if she had been trying to treat herself.

"Everyone gather here. We must hear what the returning apprentices have to say." Lagoonstripe sat down in front of Crescentpaw. Because Lagoonstripe was so tall and lithe, she was a bit taller in height than the largest apprentice.

"First we need to tell you all where, uhmmm-." She faltered as Racoonstripe settled into a spot amongst the group of Riverclan cats. Emberfawn stayed standing, his whiskers stiff with anticipation. The tom's deep green eyes nearly matched the gloomy forest behind him.

"What?"

I've got to tell them at some point, and it's very important so I might as well tell them now! She curled her sopping wet tail around her forepaws.

"Where Goldenheart has gone."

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Racoonstripe

22

[image]
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Alpinefog turned sharp, slitted green eyes on her.

"No... It can't be." Water dripped from his chin.

Crescentpaw nodded, eventually meeting his gaze through the haze of rain.

"Yes. We saw her outside of a Twoleg nest while we were trying to find our way back. We made her tell us where the lake was."

Quietdew gasped, "The nerve! Golden-heart? What a pathetic excuse of a warriors name for a cat like that." She snarled, water flicking from her whiskers as she shook with repulsion. "She doesn't deserve a clan name!"

Raccoonstripe's shocked copper eyes showed deep brown in the gathered shadows of dusk. The fur atop his head was slick with rain. He got up and moved to a drier patch of earth, his paws causing a squelching sound.

"You should've made her come back," Rowanpaw chimed in, but her gratuitous comment was overlooked.

Lagoonstripe nodded at them respectfully. "At least we have two more loyal Riverclan cats that did whatever it took to return." Her ears were flattened to prevent water from trickling into her ear canals.

"I never thought of Goldenheart as a traitor. We assumed she had died on her way to the Moonpool, but now that we know for a fact she's chosen to leave us..." The Riverclan warrior sighed despondently. "Well let's just say that I regret the sincerity of that vigil."

Raccoonstripe snickered, his teeth flashing off-white through the drizzle.

"And to imagine her soaking up the kittypet life while we fought for our Clan against this carnage."

"But this news just makes taking a course of action all the more necessary," Alpinefog interjected. "Starclan hasn't sent us a sign to replace Goldenheart's position yet. They might be waiting for us to come to them."

Crescentpaw turned her head to look at each warrior in turn, ignoring Lagoonstripe's praise. "You mean... you all haven't done anything?" The rain trickled down her face and past the corners of her eyes. She shook her fur out quickly enough to hear their response.

"Apart from having me organize the mini-patrols each morning, no." Lagoonstripe sighed, her green eyes half-closed with stress. Clouds were knotted together above the moon, blocking out most of the light that they'd had.

"At this point, none of us are certain what to do. There's just not enough cats left to sustain Riverclan. We can't even elect new warriors or apprentices without a leader." An owl hooted in the trees beyond their camp, it's "Hoo! Hooh!" Echoing throughout the marsh forest.

"And with no medicine cat there's no one to treat our wounds! I hardly know what comfrey is for, let alone the rest of them." Quietdew whined.

"I miss when Riverclan was a real clan," Rowanpaw scowled. "I bet some of us could make it great again here."

"Oh Houndspots, be a dear and fetch me that squirrel." Quietdew commanded, while Lagoonstripe and Crescentpaw continued to look distressed. The two she-cats licked at their sodden chest-furs, then peered over at one other. Houndspots went to go pick up the squirrel beside its decimated fish companion, his brown-and-white pelt rippling as he stepped between them.

"Well, if we're being honest... We probably could've done more to try and reach the other clans or make it to the Moonpool. But we just assumed that they had already tried the same." Alpinefog nodded agreement at Lagoonstripe's words, while Crescentpaw felt the fur along her slicked-down pelt ripple with unease. *That's odd. Why have we still not heard from the other clans? They must've had the same ideas as us, surely?* She watched a few fireflies flutter over the stick-wall boundary. They recurrently glowed on and off again every few seconds, drifting loftily in and over the camp. *Could the other four clans all be dead or scattered?*

"And I've encouraged our remaining warriors not to leave the territory, where they're most exposed and vulnerable. Not to mention the new rule that no cats are allowed out of camp after dark. Well, unless they're chasing out wolves." Lagoonstripe's tone was calm and composed. A few tree branches trembled above, rattling against one another as the rain poured.

Normally the Riverclan cats would've been inside their dens. But they weren't afraid to get a little rained on when the situation called for it.

It almost sounds like excuses. She thought, but couldn't bring herself to deject them by saying it aloud. *And yet deep down I can sort of see where they're coming from. There's no real guidance for us. No cat to tell us what to do, and no cat willing to throw their life away in a blind display of last-attempts.*

"Wouldn't want to lose one of our last six warriors, you know..." Alpinefog mewed, his voice turning heavy and emotional.

"But it's easy! Just send two cats to the Moonpool. Me and you, Alpinefog. If two cats go then one could have a chance at living and bringing back Starclan's message!"

An immediate pause in the conversation occurred, an awkward silence ensuing. Frogs croaked in the wet puddles beyond camp, and rain dripped off of whiskers as they all stared in wonder at Rowanpaw.

Why would she say that? Crescentpaw swished her tabby-and-white

tail behind her uncertainly. Her sister's idea was foreboding. Was she trying to say that if given the choice, she'd save herself over her mentor in order to reach Starclan? The "one could have a chance" part was unnecessary. And yet Rowanpaw sat obliviously before them, her ears pricked in eager expectation of a response. When she realized that nobody was going to answer her, she flattened them with an attitude.

"Right," Houndspots said. He looked over at his apprentice Tinypaw approvingly. "Welcome back, you two. It's great to hear that you were captured instead of fleeing the clan willingly." He shot an unimpressed look at Rowanpaw, to which the young she-cat scrucnched her face up.

"Thanks, Houndspots." Crescentpaw nodded but didn't move from her spot, still worried about their next course of action.

"But we have to do *something*. Can't we at least reach the other clans somehow? Haven't you all at least *seen* them across the lake and on patrols?" Crescentpaw's gaze was level with each warrior as she questioned them. Oddly enough they didn't mind the take-charge apprentice giving her input.

Now that the leader and deputy were gone, no cat had any real jurisdiction over another- besides mentors over apprentices. *And my mentor is dead.*

"Not really," several of them shook their heads. "Their scent markers have also been fading into oblivion," Emberfawn advised.

"I saw a few cats on the lakeshore of Skyclan territory, but we haven't came across any Shadowclan cats in a moon. And never soon enough to ask them about anything." Raccoonstripe gave his input. The young tom's stripes shone obsidian against the wet terrain.

Frustrated, Crescentpaw threw her head back beneath a pouring sky. Droplets bounced against her closed eyelids, but most of them were distorted by the tree's overhanging branches.

"Then someone has to go to the Moonpool or try to cross over into

another Clan." She mewed in unyielding tones. "Traversing the clan territories first might be safer; since there's a lot more trees along the way. We could try to find the other clan cats and join forces, then visit Starclan." she advised them.

Alpinefog nodded, his deep mew rumbling as he agreed. "It's been too long without the five warrior clans interacting."

She wondered what remained of the other clan's camps. *Windclan's would be the worst because they've got sparse trees and no woodland*. Crescentpaw then restrained herself from wincing, realizing that she could not climb a tree to avoid the savage predators. *Somehow I'm worse off than a Windclan cat.*

"I can go," she offered up on her own accord. *Whether it's a death wish or not, I'm one of the most disposable cats here.*

But of course several Riverclan warriors shook their heads.

"We won't send apprentices. It's too high-risk. But, well... I suppose we could try sending one warrior. That's all we can spare right now," the striped she-cat sighed. "It has been awhile since we tried sending any cat out of the territory." Lagoonstripe flexed her whiskers, looking further troubled.

"So are there any volunteers?" Her mouth moved as she mewed. "A journey around the lake would be perilous, so be aware of the hazards before you answer." No warrior spoke up, and so- naturally, Lagoonstripe huffed and slanted her eyes through the rain.

"Well, then take a few days to think about it. If no cat elects to go I suppose I'll send *myself* on the second sunrise after tomorrow." Puddles were beginning to form around their paws as she straightened. Water trickled down Crescentpaw's spine, causing it to twitch involuntarily.

The tabby-and-white she-cat checked on Cheetah. She was standing next to Tinypaw, her golden gaze fixated on them with utter concentration. *I'll have to really hammer it home about that eavesdropping thing, won't I?* It was fine in this situation, but Crescentpaw had a feeling that Cheetah was the type to listen in on

clan leader's conversations. Not that they had one to be participating in any, mind you.

"Now brings us to the issue of the kittypet you two apprentices brought back." Alpinefog didn't look impressed to be saying so, and Lagoonstripe seemed to share his level of condemnment. Both of their gazes turned stern. Their twin pale-green eyes could glower the bark off a tree.

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Alpinefog

23

[image]
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"What a time to return with a kittypet." Alpinefog's mew was flat and sarcastic.

Rowanpaw looked smug about them being scolded, but their kin had the sense not to say anything out loud.

"We would've expected better of you two. But what's your name young she-cat?" Lagoonstripe asked.

Cheetah jumped up from her resting spot with her spotted tail waving eagerly behind her. Even in the moist moonlit night-time, her fur shone a simmering gold-lemon color.

"Hi, I'm Cheetah and I want to join Riverclan so that I can hunt and train with you guys. And become a warrior to fight off wolves and keep the clan alive, just like Tinypaw and Crescentpaw said!" There was an enthusiastic glint in her eyes, even through the haze of rain that screened them.

"W-well," Lagoonstripe seemed taken aback.

"We certainly like your enthusiasm," Houndspots put in.

"Right. The clans have accepted kittypets in dire times before, but it's really not our place to admit you. That would be Starclan's through a leader's approval." Lagoonstripe peered down at her with a serene olive gaze.

"And as you can see, none of us are a leader."

"So what's that mean for right now? Can I stay?" Cheetah mewed excitedly, her jaws moving fast. She hardly ever gave time for pause.

"Well... all it means is that none of us can tell you no. I guess it also constitutes that you can stay here and wait for some sort of apprentice tryout until we get a leader." Alpinefog affirmed for her. "But I have to admit that it's dangerous and we ain't living easy out here. Especially now." His fluffy cheeks portruded in a kind smile, even as he gave the warning. *I knew that at least some cats would like her.*

Before the even-tempered warrior had even finished Cheetah squealed. "Can my name be Cheetahpaw like theirs!?"

Crescentpaw shuffled her paws with embarrassment before leaning forward and laying her tail across her excited friend's shoulders. Lagoonstripe, eyes wide, leaned back. Alpinefog had a rumbling laugh as Crescentpaw drew her companion slightly away.

"We don't have any apprentice ceremonies right now because like they said; we don't have a leader." Crescentpaw explained patiently. "So no cat can appoint you as an official apprentice with the name 'paw attached yet. I'll explain it to you in full detail later."

Lagoonstripe nodded agreement at them while Quietdew glared from over the taller she-cat's shoulders.

"If you ask me, we don't need any kittpets in the clan right now. It's as worse a time as ever and we should be focused on training the apprentices that we already got! They're behind on training."

"We were almost of warrior age when we got taken," Crescentpaw meowed in warning tones. *How did I forget how annoying Quietdew can be? She's got as many grievances as she does scars under her fur.*

"That doesn't mean anything!" The dark grey-and-white warrior blatantly argued. "You're further behind than Rowanpaw is now." Rowanpaw puffed her chest from behind Alpinefog. "And without a leader to appoint you a new mentor, how will you be trained?"

Lagoonstripe had the decency to roll her eyes. Crescentpaw flicked her tail with satisfaction as the mature she-cat backed her up. "The least we can do is appoint her a stand-in mentor. I'll do it myself." Lagoonstripe shifted her paws and glanced over at Crescentpaw.

Briefly, she felt reassured.

"Thank you, Lagoonstripe."

Quietdew kept her jaws closed this time. However, it was the previously-proud Rowanpaw that asked another question.

"Can we appoint a stand-in leader as well?" She asked with huge innocent eyes that were round as a pair of double moons. The comparison was fitting, since they were yellow and nearly glowing in the dim light.

Tinypaw huffed, while Crescentpaw shot her sister a questioning look. Rowanpaw seemed to avoid it, angling her face away and leaning closer to Lagoonstripe.

"So that we have someone to organize patrols and den repairs," she further explained. Crescentpaw frowned. *She just wants what's best for Riverclan, but she goes about it in the wrong way.* Rowanpaw twitched both ears at once, water-droplets flicking from the tips. The beech leaves behind her were dripping with rain.

"No, I think Lagoonstripe has been doing her best at that job already. None of us have the authority to hand out such a title," Alpinefog meowed. "As it goes we're all equals until Starclan sends us a sign. That or some cat making it to the Moonpool and back. We need Starclan advice," he summed up with a glance back at his apprentice.

"All in good time," Lagoonstripe murmured. "We must make contact with the other Clans first. If we can get their remaining numbers on Riverclan's territory then we could use Rowanpaw's idea and send two or three cats after the Moonpool."

Rowanpaw visibly quivered at that. "See? I knew we could figure something out if we worked together!" She mewed proudly with her chest puffed out again. Crescentpaw thought she was trying too hard to get the warriors approval.

"Well- since we've now decided that some cat is going by the second sunrise after tomorrow, I'm going to my nest." Quietdew grumpily

announced. She was one of the few Riverclan cats who didn't like rain. Emberfawn followed behind her, but stepped out of camp and into the guard's position just outside. Raccoonstripe and Houndspots were having an urgent discussion, both seemingly unwilling to head for their nests.

"Hey Alpinefog, you want to share that mouse I caught earlier?" Rowanpaw asked her mentor hopefully. She seemed to be bragging at the same time as offering, her mew loud enough for all of the other cats to hear.

Alpinefog shook his sopping-wet head. "I fancy a salmon tonight, actually. And thank Starclan it's Greenleaf, about the only time that I could hope to find one on the fresh-kill pile." Rowanpaw glanced over at her watching kin uncomfortably, then followed Alpinefog over to the pile of prey.

"Well I had a question to ask about my warrior assesment. Even though we don't have a leader right now, could I still go ahead and get a mock-assesment? Like a practice one just to prove my skills would be good enough to pass?" Alpinefog fumbled his words as he searched for the right response, distracted from his picking through the pile of prey. Before Crescentpaw could catch his answer she turned away.

"Let's just go to our nests as well, Tinypaw. I'm tired anyways." Crescentpaw commented airily and lifted her tail, as if she weren't at all bothered by Rowanpaw's obvious avoidment of them.

She beckoned Cheetah with her tail-tip, but was interrupted by Lagoonstripe's mew. "Be ready for the dawn patrol tomorrow, Crescentpaw. We'll take your friend with us."

"What about me?" Tinypaw mewed, swiveling her head back towards the three warriors.

"Houndspots will decide what to do with you after I assign the sunhigh patrols. I imagine he's got some training to catch you up on." Houndspots nodded, to which Tinypaw nervously gulped. "You three just make sure to get some rest."

After they ducked into the apprentice's den Tinypaw nudged her aside. The still air felt snug and warm against their pelts, which immediately began drying in the pitch-black darkness. There was a blanket of Rowanpaw's hair amongst each and every nest, as if she had slept in all of them while they were gone. It smelled like no cat had cleaned in here since before they were captured.

"How am I supposed to train with Houndspots tomorrow?" Her sister's violet eyes were clouded with anxiety. They searched Crescentpaw's gaze desperately. "If he starts saying something about my claws I don't know what I'll do!" She shivered, her small paws digging rivulets into the moss.

Crescentpaw laid her tail-tip on Tinypaw's shoulder, bringing her down as she laid upon the moss.

"It's alright, calm down. We got away with it for one day didn't we? We can hide it for another." She stroked her sister's shoulder with a paw, trying to provide reassurance. "If Houndspots asks you to hunt try and convince him that you're more comfortable doing it alone. Miss kills in front of him, pretend to be clumsy. Then go off and try to catch something with only your jaws, like I told you. He won't think your skills are completely gone- just dampened." She met her sister's panicked gaze. Cheetah laid down beside them, her eyes wide as she watched the kin communicate.

"What about battle training?" The spotted she-cat asked, to which Tinypaw sniffled a "Thanks." She didn't seem offended about Cheetah butting in for once.

"We don't have to use our claws while battle training. Our claws are kept sheathed, so that's not much of a problem."

"Oh, okay. Wow, I'm learning so much!" Cheetah blinked her yellow eyes rapidly. They were barely visible in the jet-black denspace.

"Well if we have to be awake at dawn should I probably try to get some sleep? Even though I won't be able to because all of that was SO EXCITING and I had no idea so many cats could live outside in a place like this!"

At that, Tinypaw stuffed her head into the fluffy moss beneath them. Crescentpaw laughed.

Her worries weren't all gone, though. She found it hard to sleep that night as well. The apprentice couldn't help but wonder whether she'd hear a guard's warning yowl split the silence at any moment.

Crickets chirped amongst the overgrown reeds. They competed with the sound of rain hitting the earth, each struggling to be the highest voice. Very faintly, the cats heard sloshing and gurgling from the fast-paced streams on the edges of their camp. Riverclan's wetland forest was never fully quiet.

Tinypaw

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[image]
[image]

Lagoonstripe

"Crescentpaw and Cheetah! It's time for the dawn patrol." Lagoonstripe mewed from the den entrance as her eyes cracked open a smidge.

The weak gray light pouring in was laced with fog. Her joints cracked as she stretched them and turned right-side up, lifting to her paws and shaking each one in turn.

Freezing, Crescentpaw threw a fearful glance over at her new acting mentor. But the she-cat had already retreated. *Good thing, too. She might've seen that my claws didn't retract during that stretch.*

Cheetah left her behind as she exited the den. She hardly even paused to groom her fur. Tinypaw was still trying to sleep, stretched out in one corner with her tail flopped over her legs. As Crescentpaw gave herself a few licks and moved towards the entrance she scented damp, moist air flowing in from outside.

It was a cool dawn morning. The woven wooden stems of the apprentice's den were flecked with dew as she passed. The camp still had a few mud-laden puddles around the less grassy areas of camp. Each one reflected a cluster of cloudy, uncertain skies above. The fog was so thick that they could hardly distinguish sky from mist. It lay across Riverclan in a blanket of white-washed cotton swathes. The tabby apprentice could barely see the empty leader's den from across camp.

"This is perfect weather!" Cheetah exclaimed with her huge round ears perked. "It's not even hot today."

"It probably will be after the sun rises and burns off the mist," Lagoonstripe educated. Cheetah nodded, then bounced on excited paws when she saw another cat exiting the dirtplace tunnel.

"I'm ready to go," Emberfawn said after a huge yawn, pausing beside them.

"Weren't you on watch last night, though?" Crescentpaw looked him up and down. His fur was unkept and messy, with one of his ears still turned inside out.

Lagoonstripe flicked it with a paw, fixing it.

"He was, but Houndspots relieved him partway through. Unfortunately with so few warriors we have been subjected to cutting our sleeping times in half." The older warrior shuffled her paws, as if concerned that she couldn't properly manage the shortage of cats left.

"I understand," Crescentpaw said quickly. "I bet it would help if *we* could stand guard, though." She let a bit of suggestiveness creep into her voice. But Lagoonstripe was already shaking her head, scarred cheeks set in a firm half-smile.

"Nice try, but it wouldn't be worth it. If we don't keep our apprentices alive then we'll have even less of a future for Riverclan."

Crescentpaw dejectedly turned her head away. She loftily glanced into the sea-foam blue grey sky above. *Guess I'll just have to give it up. Even though we're of warrior age nothing's going to change.*

"Alright, what border are we checking today?"

"Windclan's. And as you can see, Emberfawn will be coming with us." The red-brown tom licked a paw and drew it over his ear. He glanced at Cheetah with mild interest when the she-cat began chattering on again.

"I heard all about Windclan from Crescentpaw and Tinypaw. They live on the moorland and prefer to sleep under the stars, in tall grasses or in gorse patches. When there isn't bad weather, that is," she specified with an animated toss of her head.

"Ooh! And Crescentpaw- my best friend," she mewed delightfully, startling the apprentice as she gazed over at her spotted companion. "-said there was a rumor about them using tunnels."

"Wow. It's kind of cool how you remembered all of that," the young tom said smoothly.

"If anybody else is willing to wait until we get back to eat, then I'm ready to go. You can all chat along the way." Lagoonstripe's pale green gaze was watchful as she led the way out of camp.

Cheetah talked a lot as they walked on, and it didn't help her keep her surroundings in check. She stumbled in shallow dunes along the streambed and knocked her paws against hillocks of grass when she wasn't looking. Which was despicably most of the time.

"Look towards your paws before you take a step," Lagoonstripe tried to patiently instruct, but Cheetah was finding no success. "You'll improve eventually but great Starclan, I hope it's soon. If a wolf decided to stay out hunting early into dawn- which, by the way, has happened before," She told her patiently. "Then I'm afraid they would've heard us *far before* catching our scent."

She has a long way to go, Crescentpaw pondered as she slunk around the far-spaced foliage of Riverclan's saturated forest. Lagoonstripe scolded her spotted friend as she saw fit, but kept any overbearing comments to herself. This only seemed to fuel Cheetah's enthusiasm, and so they hadn't seen any land prey by the time they reached Windclan's border.

"The fog is lifting," Lagoonstripe stated as she gazed across the stream separating Windclan's territory from Horseplace. The bottom half of their territory was primarily swathed with overgrown sedgegrass and clusters of lavender-hued heather. A golden-orange sun peeked just over the very edge of the horizon, turning the sky citrus with streaks of vermillion.

"This place is so beautiful," Cheetah whispered as a gust of wind tugged on her whiskers. The air was much easier to feel out here. Crescentpaw saw a horse run to the edge of its enclosure from the corner of her eye. She thought it was brown-and-white in color, but

it was hard to tell from this far off. The animal threw its head back and reared. It was probably whinnying but the cats couldn't hear it over the whipping of the dawn wind.

"It is," Crescentpaw agreed. "This is what you were missing." She wanted to say something about Cheetah's grand-cat Caracal, then figured it wasn't the right time. *I should wait until we're alone. The other Riverclan cats don't even know that Caracal exists yet.*

Cheetah was shown how to mark the borders and then they moved on. Emberfawn seemed receptive to her constant idle chat. He nodded and gave a laugh when prompted to, showing a flat-lined enthusiasm at times. Crescentpaw smiled when he did, wondering if the tom was realizing that Cheetah wasn't that bad.

The tabby-and-white apprentice didn't offer to hunt on the way back to camp. She didn't want to deal with showing off her lackluster skills right now. *I'd still be hunting just fine if I weren't forepaw-clawless. I'm going to have to adjust my hunting techniques.*

She still had no idea what she would do about fishing. But being a 'worry about it later' kind of cat, she shook out her pelt and carried on.

The patrol crossed over a river and padded up the short stretch of hillock that led to camp. All traces of fog had been lifted. The sun was peeking out behind clouds intermittently, warming the cat's backs and then whisking away again. The breeze was lofty and tugged at their whiskers every few seconds, as it swirled its way between the wide-spaced trees.

"I'm glad we don't have all that undergrowth like Thunderclan," Emberfawn meowed in good nature. "It gives us more room to grow." He rolled his shoulders and glanced over at Cheetah.

"They could say the same about Windclan cats but look at them." Crescentpaw joked.

"Yes, it's the river that really gives us our strength. Both inside and outside. Over the moons I have never seen a Clan attack on our camp."

"But then, we haven't really had the chance to argue very much. With the wolves and all," Emberfawn commented. He looked at his paws as he walked, a bit less enthusiastic now. The four cats passed beneath a tree and were temporarily swathed in shadow.

"How long have the wolves been attacking Riverclan, Lagoonstripe?" Cheetah asked. Crescentpaw was impressed. It was a good question. She had asked her father once, and all he'd said was; "It hasn't always been like this."

Lagoonstripe thought for a moment. Her silver tabby pelt slid across well-toned muscles as she slowed. They were approaching Riverclan's camp entrance, where Raccoonstripe was posted on guard. The striped grey warrior sat beside overgrown shrubbery, his expression bored.

"I was a new warrior when it started happening," Lagoonstripe began thoughtfully. "And over the past year it's gotten progressively worse. The gatherings I can remember during those times were tense and frightened." She flattened her ears. "Eventually the medicine cats who'd made it to the Moonpool reported news from Starclan. They said that Starclan told them not to worry, and they would soon send a sign."

"What was the sign?" Cheetah asked eagerly, beating Crescentpaw to it. Lagoonstripe nodded politely at Racoonstripe, then slipped past him into camp.

They all followed her in. The thickest part of the den wall was the entrance, because the wolves hardly used it. They preferred to leap over the stick boundary, often breaking the wood into splinters. The feeble attempt at creating a barrier had been in vain. The predators could clear the camp wall with a light bound.

"We don't know," the mature young warrior sighed raspily. "We never got the sign. Or at least not soon enough for any cat to share it before the Gatherings came to a halt." She began heading over to the portion of stream that veered into a U-shape right near the edge of camp. It was behind the apprentices den and close to the elders, which was still torn apart and broken.

"If any cat knew, they probably aren't alive by now. We can assume that they're in somewhat of the same situation; else they'd have sent word to us." Emberfawn frowned and plopped his rump against the ground, leaning over the flowing water. He peered down as if looking for fish but there was only minnows in this area of water.

"Unfortunately I'd have to agree with that," Lagoonstripe murmured and bent over the edge of the drop to take a sip. When she sat up she licked her lips. "The clans used to visit one another in dire times by traveling across the lakeshore. Of course, that route is too dangerous now. We've been cut off from one another like stars flung far apart."

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Lagoonstripe

25

[image] [image]

Cheetah

It was later that same day that Crescentpaw got asked to practice hunting with Cheetah. Lagoonstripe led them out of camp, and the two apprentices followed behind with their tails lifted obediently.

Crescentpaw was initially timid. She almost sighed aloud with relief when her acting mentor asked them to demonstrate a hunting crouch. Cheetah's was horrible and off-balance, with one of her paws reaching forward too far and wobbling.

"No, do like Crescentpaw is. Tuck your paw in with your claws unsheathed. Visualize and prepare the blow, but don't overthink it. Act like you're about to swipe at a butterfly."

Cheetah instinctively curled her paw into her chest for recoil, then stiffened and held herself there.

"Now flatten your spine and lift your tail. Bring your legs closer together. Lower. Yep, even lower than that though."

Crescentpaw held her crouch with a quivering tail-tip, relieved that the silver tabby was training Cheetah more than paying attention to her.

"Still that tail, Crescentpaw. Not a vibration of movement from it or it may cause a blade of grass to twitch. And you too, Cheetah. It's waving all over the place!" She scolded, but her tone was light as she sat and looked over them. Thin sedge fronds quivered in the breeze behind her. Knotty bare tree trunks towered above the cats, spacious with unfurling, far-reaching branches.

When Lagoonstripe was satisfied with the hunting crouches she

moved on to pouncing with Cheetah. Crescentpaw was used as more of a demonstration, although she could feel Lagoonstripe's gaze flick over her back every now and then. She tried to move naturally, without making it obvious that she was avoiding drawing attention to her paws. It wasn't much longer that Lagoonstripe nodded at Cheetah's progress and moved onto the next.

They were guided to the shallowest riverbed, which branched off from the one that flowed out of the lake. Over here the river channel's shore turned from rocky pebbles to sandy grit, sticking to their paw-pads as they walked. All three cats sat down close together beneath the shade of a small elm tree, where the main throngs of fish preferred to hang out.

"This is a hot-spot in sunhigh Greenleaf. See that branch just underneath the surface? Fish gather in swarms under there. They feel safe underneath things, like it's one of their dens."

Crescentpaw felt a tingle of pride at how much her acting mentor was teaching. *She's oversharing for Cheetah's sake. Already Cheetah has had a lot of tips that weren't actually necessary to grasp the training.* In the tabby-and-white apprentices eyes, Lagoonstrip had always been stern and mature. She never acted out or showed an ounce of true repulsion. And yet now Crescentpaw was seeing an even wiser side of her.

"I think Cheetah would make a great warrior. Don't you, Lagoonstripe?" She asked the lithe she-cat, who paused in her instructions.

"Well, uh- not to be wry," she admitted with pricked ears. "But I have only known her for one day."

Cheetah laughed. "Two, if you count yesterday!"

"Oh, come on!" Crescentpaw leaned closer, her thick tail twisting into a curl and flipping around beside her. "You know she's *at least* great apprentice material."

Laggonstripe chuckled and flicked her own tail cheerily. "I can't argue with that! You listen well," Laggonstripe looked over at

Cheetah while she gave the compliment.

The spotted she-cat nodded, her whole face lighting up as her eyes stretched wide and her mouth gaped with joy.

"Oh wow thank you!!! It's because I want to! I truly want to learn everything about this place it's so awesome! Just look at the sun glinting off the water. I've never seen anything like that," Cheetah mewed with awe. "So you can really teach me how to catch a fish? And become a whole warrior?"

"I can teach you the skills, yes. But first Crescentpaw will demonstrate. I want to see if any of her fishing skills need improvement."

Crescentpaw winced. The still water below reflected the dark green leafshade above their heads. *Oh no.*

No no no no no. This can't be happening already! Her heart pounded in her chest, blood roaring in her ears as she stood up and tried to hide it.

"Okay," she choked out. Then the apprentice hoped she hadn't sounded hesitant.

She moved over the smooth stretch of sand to the edge. The apprentice clenched her teeth, trying to prevent the nervous terror that was threatening to portray itself.

The two other cats made space for her. Crescentpaw leaned over the edge and waited. For the entiriy of the time her thoughts were racing. And yet all she could think of was to bite it with her teeth.

Riverclan cats did use this method to grasp fish from the river, of course- but it was known as something that more advanced warriors did. She had only tried it herself a couple of times, and never succeeded.

The first two tries, Crescentpaw came up empty-jawed. Her fur was flushed hot with heat despite her face and neck being soaked. Self-conscious, she shook the water drops from her ears.

"Just catch it with your claws. Stop showing off."

Alarm bells rang in her head. She almost twisted around and told the truth, then stopped herself. *I can't let them find out. At least not yet; for Tinypaw's sake.* The young apprentice knew that her sister could not mentally handle being thrown out of the Clan.

She plunged her paws into the water as soon as she saw a shadow. Her toes extended in an attempt to grasp it but no claws came out; just as she'd expected.

Crescentpaw instead slipped her paw beneath the fish's slippery body and flicked upwards. In less than a second she had flung the fish out and into the air with an upside-down curled forepaw.

Even she herself was astounded. It hit her in the face on its way down and nearly slipped back into the water. The gritty earth along the streambed was wet and easy to dislodge, and sloped at the perfect angle for a fish to flop back in. But Lagoonstripe was watching closely and snatched it up.

"Well done. Just make sure you sink your claws in harder on the uptake if you don't want it to fling around like that." She pierced her claws into the fish's head. Its gills leaked a few lines of blood as it died.

"Cheetah, go ahead and get started on trying to do that. We'll stay out just a little longer and then head back to camp. We must make it back before sundown."

As the she-cat's kept hunting into the lengthening shadows they didn't ask for the reason why. They knew.

"I feel bad for the first time that you have to see a wolf," Crescentpaw mewed to her friend on the way back to camp. She had to say it around the small carp in her jaws. *It won't be long now. Maybe even tonight.* The apprentice gulped. They stepped around thornbushes and clumps of wateroak together. Dandelions poked up from the earth-brown soil, brushing their paws as they walked.

"It's alright. It's not like I didn't ask for it." Cheetah turned and

looked at her friend with a contented expression. "Whatever they are- however savage they are, I think it's worth being here. It's worth all of this," she pricked her ears at the wilderness around them. The air smelled of cattails and forest prey. Hulking silvery willow trees spread far apart provided shade-pools for relief from the dazzling heat. The dark green grass beneath their paws was orange-tipped from the burning sun above. It was at its last stage of dipping behind the horizon before sunset.

"Well said. I'm glad you joined Riverclan," she admitted to her companion. Cheetah gave a wide smile and bumped into her shoulder with good sport. It almost knocked the fish out of her jaws.

"Me too! And I'm going to catch my first fish tomorrow, just wait! Did you see how close I came on that last one? I felt it touch my paw!" Cheetah ran out of breath halfway through talking, so the end of her sentence was a stream of airy stretched-out words.

Crescentpaw meowed agreement, nodding. "I saw it slip right underneath! Use more pressure when pushing your paw underwater next time, and you'll go deep enough to catch one!" She felt herself becoming drawn to the hunting culture of their clan. Crescentpaw genuinely loved all that Riverclan had to offer, and grew more adamantly entrenched in their discussion.

Cheetah was nodding, but she had already swept on. "Wait until you start learning to fish underwater!" Tall switchgrass muted the sound of their padding paws. Sparse foilage rustled softly around them in the light breeze. Crescentpaw adjusted the fish in her jaws, trying to talk faster around it. "That's when the real fun starts." She recalled diving underneath churning river waves with Aquasplash, her mentor. That's when they had swam out and hunted in the middle of the lake, ducking down beneath the surface and dropping to the river-floor below. In newleaf and greenleaf the fish teemed with life down there.

"Aquasplash taught you well," Lagoonstripe mewed. She was loping just behind them, clearly trying to act as a barrier between them and any pursuing predators.

"I know," Crescentpaw sighed and found it hard to meet her gaze. Her thoughts stayed stuck on Aquasplash the rest of the way home.

Although Cheetah isn't an apprentice yet, what would you choose for her Warrior name?

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26

[image] [image]

"I'm so tired that my paws could drop off." Tinypaw sighed as they padded side-by-side into the apprentices den. Cheetah was just in front of them. "Me too," she said. Her paws and tail dragged as well.

Rowanpaw was in the corner with her head lowered. She twitched her ears as they all walked in.

"This is what the warriors have been dealing with. Imagine getting a few winks of sleep then waking up to the sound of a wolf attack on the camp. It's back to more of that, Crescentpaw."

Crescentpaw sounded weary as she agreed with her sister. "Yeah, I pray to Starclan they don't attack us anymore. That would be a miracle wouldn't it?" She mewed with feeble hope.

"Don't say that," The brown chestnut she-cat warned. "It could very well happen *tonight*. Or right before dawn." Crescentpaw shuffled her paws, unsettled because her littermate was right.

This makes me feel worse about my plan.

"Let's sleep over there!" Tinypaw cut in before Cheetah could flop down. Rowanpaw gave them a condemning glance, as if they were weird.

"Thank Starclan. The chattering kittypet will be farther away from my nest now." She complained with her paws crossed, but all three she-cats ignored her.

They settled in a nest beside the back wall. Cypress shrub needles brushed against their stretched out tails. Crescentpaw tugged a few twigs out of her belly-fur with her teeth, flinging them far away from the nest.

"Hey. We need to talk about something when you get the chance."

Tinypaw lowered her meows to an urgent whisper. It was clear she was trying to supress her anxiety, as she turned with her backside facing toward Rowanpaw.

"Don't say anything else about it. But it was very hard to hide my... problem today." Her voice was quieter than the chirping crickets outside the den. She folded her forepaws under her chest against the spare nest of moss. "Sooner or later we're going to need a better solution."

Crescentpaw kept an eye on their sister, benevolent as she gazed between the other apprentices.

The tabby-and-white she-cat thought she could see a half-open yellow slitted eye, but Rowanpaw hadn't moved. If she'd heard anything she was pretending not to. With her tail curled around her paws, Rowanpaw's head was lain flat against the nest-bottom. *Still lying down, then. We came in a little bit loud while she was trying to sleep...*

"Say no more." The apprentice's silky meow was hushed.

The bracken beneath each nest was dusty and crumbled. It crunched under Crescentpaw's weight as she laid down. The dark den-space adjacent to them had room to spare. But there was no need for more nests; bare patches of weeded-out earth lay dark and smooth in the gloom.

There was once a time when Riverclan had lots of apprentices, and queens and kits and elders. But those days were gone.

Until someone brings them back.

She felt a stir of resilience in her gut. Cheetah talked a bit more, but she was inclined enough to notice that the apprentices needed their sleep.

And Crescentpaw especially. Because she had something *very* special planned for tomorrow's sunrise.

By the will of Starclan, please Riverclan ancestors. Help me wake up early enough, she prayed before she fell asleep.

Another cat's paws were resting on her flank when Crescentpaw awoke. She drowzily pushed them off without thinking, never realizing it was Cheetah.

Her first reaction was to close her eyes and go back to sleep. But then she flung them wide open, remembering the plan. *It's time to go.*

There was no dawn light spilling in through the trendil-covered den entrance. Instead the sky beyond the entryway was indigo-black. The clouds held a slight stormy-grey hue. *Soon the horizon will lighten for dawn.*

She had to get out there and on with her mission before Lagoonstripe woke up.

Crescentpaw eagerly tried to bound over her companion's nests, causing her to step down on Cheetah's ear. This time the spotted she-cat fully woke up.

She lifted her head and cracked open one eye, asking "Why are you awake so early?" Her tone was groggy with sleep. Cheetah yawned, mouth stretching hugely.

"I-uh." *I don't have time for this.*

Crescentpaw worriedly glanced at the exit and into the dingy clouds outside.

"Look, Cheetah. Just listen real fast okay? I have to leave. Lagoonstripe will train you while I'm gone. Whenever she wakes up just ask her what the apprentice duties for today are."

"But what about you? Where are you going?" Cheetah blinked. Her golden irises glowed, huge pupils dilated to let in the weak light. She seemed wide awake now.

The guilt that tugged at Crescentpaw's heart was too much to bear. She realized that she couldn't let her clan think that they were missing a member again.

She sighed and scooted closer. "Just tell Lagoonstripe and Tinypaw that I won't be back for two sunsets. Don't tell *anyone* else," She whispered fiercely.

"And one more thing. Tell them not to look for me until after then." The tabby apprentice let her voice drop into a more serious tone, hoping it helped burn the instructions into Cheetah's fleeting thoughts.

"It's very important that you tell Lagoonstripe not to leave the territory until I get back- or don't after that second sunset."

For a long moment Cheetah just stared at her. The wheels began turning in her head until she eventually gasped. "Hush!" Crescentpaw scolded as Rowanpaw shifted in her nest. Her sister was submerged in moss close to the entrance. She soon settled again.

"You're going on Lagoonstripe's mission for her, to meet with the other clans." Cheetah's voice quieted with awe. She flicked her tail-tip eagerly.

"Can't I go with you?" The she-cat finally blurted. "You're going to need help."

"No! I have to go." Crescentpaw fitfully snapped. She pressed her clawless paws into the bracken impatiently.

Cheetah eventually gave a slow nod.

"Alright, but be safe." The spotted she-cat got up to nuzzle Crescentpaw before she left. She was surprised by the gesture, but melted with relief regardless.

"I'll see you in two sunrises. Cheetah meowed as she stepped back.

"You have to come back, Crescentpaw. Me and Tinypaw will miss you too much if you don't. I'll keep your nest warm until you do."

Starclan please don't let her fall to the wolves while I'm gone! Crescentpaw thought as she looked at her friend.

"And by the latest on the second sunset. Don't forget to tell Lagoonstripe that."

I hope that's giving myself enough time. Haven't cats went around the lake faster than that before?

"Be careful around here, Cheetah. If you hear a guard yowl then bolt for the nearest tree and climb it. Just... try to make sure Tinypaw is hidden behind a den wall first."

She felt her reassuring smile falter into a frown. The tabby-and-white apprentice looked over at her sleeping black littermate.

Will all my clanmates be alive when I come back? Am I helping them more in this way than if I just stayed in camp?

Ugh. I mustn't second guess myself.

She didn't allow herself a goodbye any longer. If she did, then Tinypaw or Rowanpaw might wake up. Not to mention Lagoonstripe poking her nose into the den for early training.

While the tabby-and-white apprentice flitted from the den she crossed the clearing in an innocent manner. She had her tail loftily lifted and eyes set on the dirtplace tunnel.

No cat spotted her. As the pounding of her heart settled she slipped through the exit and out the other side. The dirtplace had soft, peaty ground. She stepped across it silently and pushed through the bulrushes.

Crescentpaw hadn't preferred to use this way but it was her only option at avoiding the camp entrance's guard. They often patrolled beyond the camp's torn-apart walls, padding around the perimeter.

As she came up to the riverbed's lapping waves she kept her ears pricked for any pre-dawn hunting warriors. Not that there was likely to be any, though.

She shook water off onto the woodrushes, picking up speed and racing through the territory. Crescentpaw knew that she needed to leave Riverclan land before dawn fully broke. Before the sun stained its crimson across the horizon. *Before the clan wakes up.*

The apprentice knew exactly where she would head first. She would get her minds-image of the most intimidating clan out of the way.

Shadowclan, here I come.

_____

Crescentpaw

27

[image] [image]

Crescentpaw

Crescentpaw made it to Shadowclan land by the time dawn broke. She knew she could not hunt while she traveled there. If she was caught prey-stealing the entire plan might backfire.

She traveled along with her belly clenched and growling. This was her first real experience of Shadowclan territory. She had seen their tightly-clustered pines from the lapping lakeshore before, but being inside of them was a lot different. Most of the tree foliage hid the other territories with wide-spread low-reaching branches. Layers and layers of pine needles and prickly flattened pine cones were built up under-paw. They crunched beneath her pads as she walked.

It was reassuring being there early morning. The stars and moon had dimmed out, making way for a glorious shining-sun dawn. Barely a cloud drifted by on the horizon. Wind tugged at her ears and swirled between the trunks, indecisive as it switched directions. It brought with it the scent of pine sap and spruce needles.

The she-cat slowed her pace. She realized that she was getting closer to the heart of Shadowclan territory. The brambles were more thickly swathed here, and stumbled into some of them until she saw the dip of their camp's location below.

Crescentpaw rounded the bushery and bramble thickets along the edge of its walls. She kept padding with her tail lowered, then halted at the odd scent that was emitting from this side of camp.

It smelled like... *death*.

It felt like it, too. Her paws sank into the ground underneath her weight, and that's when she realized.

The earth beneath her paws was barren. The tufts of grass had been

ripped up from excavation. A few of the obvious dirt piles were fresh. Others were flattened out and had begun growing grass again, but most were in the same relative shape and size.

These are cat's burial plots. Their bodies are beneath my paws.

Crescentpaw retched. She stepped off of the fresh graves and ducked her head around to the other side of camp, padding faster.

The Riverclan apprentice began to wonder why Shadowclan was burying their clanmates' bodies so close to camp, but the thought was soon forgotten. Someone was breathing raggedly beyond the den walls.

Crescentpaw began more adamantly looking for the entrance, and finally found it. She had to walk down a long snaking bramble tunnel until she emerged into the light on the other side. Somehow being inside the camp gave her less heeby-jeebies than being outside of it did.

A cat was lying in the center of a small clearing, mewing with distress and panting with lack of breath. Crescentpaw bounded over immediately, seeing no other Shadowclan cats. Despite herself she couldn't help noticing the unique camp around her before she reached them.

Shadowclan's base was mostly bramble and holly bush, with thin pine trees stretching high above them. The steep dropping-off slopes of the camp's edges were swamped with herbage. A few flat boulders and overturned stones sat on one side of the clearing, where luscious grasses grew between them. Overgrown weeds conjoined each den wall, providing privacy and seperate den entrance spaces.

The dusty earth was dry and cracked beneath Crescentpaw's pads, but she could see reeds growing in stale swampy water along a shadowy boundary. She averted her eyes from the wildly overgrown camp and looked down at the stranger.

"Where are you hurt? What happened?"

The she-cat's heaving chest and loss of breath caused her to not be able to speak. Her flanks looked full and well-fed, with stringy but strong haunches stretched out beneath her. She began partially trying to sit up, eventually catching her breath.

"Who are you? Riverclan?" Crescentpaw heard droplets spattering the ground. Her eyes widened as she saw bright red crimson staining the clan cat's neck. It dripped from the wound, falling onto the sunlit earth.

Her pupils slitted with panic as she leaned forward and gently pushed the she-cat back down.

"Yes, I'm Crescentpaw. Are you Plumetail the elder? I think I saw you at a gathering once." The she-cat's long white fur was recognizable. Even in old age it laid smooth and conformed as a feather. "Don't speak," the apprentice advised, so Plumetail just nodded. The wound in her neck sagged open as she did so.

It seemed to have cobweb stuffed inside, but the cobwebs were blood-soaked. Crescentpaw anxiously gazed down at the elder as she removed her paw.

"Keep the wound facing up and the blood inside. I'll get you more cobwebs but first I need to know what happened." She frowned. "Where's the rest of your clan? Did they all leave you like this?" Crescentpaw lifted her tail for silence once the frail she-cat tried to speak again.

"No, sorry. Just flick one ear if they abandoned the clan or died, and flick two ears if they're just out hunting or finding herbs for you."

Maybe Crescentpaw wasn't an optimistic, because she assumed that the elders response would be the first of the two. She was silent when Plumetail flicked both at once.

"She is out-" the elder began croaking.

"Shh. Okay."

Ugh. It's so frustrating that I can't even ask her which Shadowclan cat

she's talking about.

"Well... what's going on with your wound? I mean is there a medicine cat left in Shadowclan left to treat it?" *I'll have to get used to this.* "Flick one ear for yes, two ears for no."

Plumetail flicked two fuzzy white ears. Crescentpaw scrunched her face and briefly looked away. *Mouse-dung. They don't have a medicine cat either. We really need one for the wounds back in Riverclan's camp as well!* The apprentice thought about Quietdew's raw-looking eye wound and Alpinefog's shredded muzzle; amongst other injuries.

She then nodded acceptance. "Alright, Plumetail. First I'm going to go and find you some fresh cobweb to pack that wound. The least we can do is stop the bleeding." Crescentpaw stroked the white she-cat with her tail tip.

"Then I'm going to wait here with you until your clanmates return, whoever they are."

Whoever is left.

Crescentpaw felt herself growing restless when the minutes stretched toward hours. The light strengthened into early sunhigh until the fur on her back burned with warmth. She opened her jaws and began panting. The apprentice didn't want to leave Plumetail out in the sun. Who had put her in the very middle of camp anyways? It seemed like a dumb idea. Shouldn't she be inside of the elders den?

But it seemed worthless to tow the elder into a den, and then back out again when her clanmates returned. She had some explaining to do before she could boss around other clan cats. *After all, I'm not*

stupid. I know I'm standing in the middle of Shadowclan's camp right now. Uninvited and unprecedented. Her paw pads began to sweat.

When the entrance barrier shivered her anxiety blew through the roof. Crescentpaw gave a nervous half-smile, standing up with one paw partly raised. *Great Starclan this is weird.*

"Um sorry- I'm Crescentpaw." She explained as a cat moved through the camp tunnel. The black warrior held two plump pieces of prey in her jaws, eyes lighting up with interest as she saw her.

Crescentpaw had expected more cats to flow in from behind the first, but no more stepped through. The heartbeats stretched by as she stared at the empty Shadowclan tunnel entrance.

"And?" The black warrior spat out her prey and looked pointedly over her shoulder. "Are you another one of those traitor Skyclan cats hoping that Shadowclan is less plagued by the wolves? Well it's not. Just have a look at Plumetail's neck." She sounded bitter and rebuking, sitting down and wrapping her tail around her paws. A butterfly flew past the stranger, tiny wings fluttering as it fought against the breeze.

Crescentpaw lifted her chin, meeting the she-cat's flint-burning gaze. *I know who this is now. It's Shadowclan's deputy Darkflower!* Her voice was jagged and recognizable from Crescentpaw's first and only gathering.

"No." *Maybe use your scent glands for once? "*I'm Crescentpaw of Riverclan, and I'm looking for the rest of Shadowclan. I'd like to speak to Gravelstar, please."

Plumetail

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[image] [image]

"He's a kittypet now," Darkflower growled defensively. "You have no idea what we've been through." Her sharp green eyes were almost stinging Crescentpaw's like nettles; even though she was still at quite a distance.

"No, but I have *some* idea. It isn't much better off in Riverclan," the apprentice mewed mildly. "Eveningstar lost her ninth life and went to Starclan." *Would it be considered oversharing if I told more than that?*

Plumetail murmured behind them. The two she-cats turned and pricked their ears.

"Please find me something fresh... for my throat. Some cobwebs to pack it with. It's bleeding through again," the elder rasped. Mid-day sun washed her pelt with a golden sheen. The she-cat lay in the driest part of the clearing, where the trees made way for light to shine down upon a wide stretch of camp earth. Crescentpaw looked around for a clear pool of water and found one in the crook of a tree root beside a bramble den.

She approached it with stiff shoulders. *I have a feeling I'm going to be very worn out by the end of today*. Working as a Riverclan apprentice since her return and now traveling across the Clan territories as fast as possible would soon catch up with her. *I've got to get this done in under two sunsets, though. Having tired paws doesn't matter.*

"How did she die?" Darkflower asked as Crescentpaw pawed away a thicket of moss from above the pool. A fluffy layer of it was stuck to the rock's southwest facing side. It was partly full of bark and dirt as she peeled it daintily away, trying to shield the embarrassing act with her body.

"How do you think? The wolves," the apprentice said simply.

"Great Starclan, has no cat ever taught you to rip off a proper chunk of moss? Well, I'm not going to teach you." Darkflower sounded repulsed as she stalked around the apprentice and leaned into her space. The she-cat expertly sliced off the topmost layer with a claw, leaving the back-side of the moss stuck against the dirty flaking bark.

Tabby-and-white Crescentpaw seethed. With gritted teeth and flattened ears, she stepped back. *I only need answers. I must get them and ask her if she's coming to the other clans with me- then leave.*

She couldn't help but try to aid Plumetail's wound while she did so, though. She took her own clump of moss and began picking the pieces of dirt and gritty bark-chunks out, grasping them or swiping them off with the tips of her toes. Luckily Darkflower was no longer looking. The deputy dunked her own wad into a small dip in the earth that was cratering a pool.

"So... if Gravelstar lost his last life then why haven't you become leader yet?" The apprentice commented after a long moment.

"Oh great Starclan... Apprentices are just like frogs, jumping to the first lilypad they see." She cut herself off as she leaned up with a mouthful of dripping moss. Casually, Crescentpaw stopped picking her bundle clean and lifted it as well.

"Look, kit. All you gotta do to figure out the answer to *that* is look around. There's no Clan left to lead. All of my Clanmates either ran off or they're dead." She murmured through the moss, then fell silent. Crescentpaw felt the layers of pine needle thin out as she padded back into the center of their camp.

She nodded, trying to sound concerned while also mentioning the state of her own clan. "Well I can't say that isn't relatable. It was hard for Plumetail to tell me much about Shadowclan because her throat hurt." Darkflower sighed agreement. She leaned forward to offer Plumetail the moss soaked in water, and Crescentpaw waited while the she-cat took a drink.

"Go get cobwebs from the medicine cat's den. It's in that cave beneath the Leader's rock."

The leaders rock was seemingly part of that boulder-pile that Crescentpaw had seen while entering the camp. She padded over to them as Darkflower pointed her tail.

Around the rock pile was a tall ring of overgrown ferns. Crescentpaw found the entrance by a scent of stale herbs flowing through the opening. Then she slipped through and searched for cobweb. It wasn't hard to find some because it was packed full of the spindly sticky webs. Reaching high in the corners and edges of the rock ceiling, she swathed a paw in the spider netting.

Crescentpaw then exited the stuffy den. Her whiskers had teeny bits of cobweb stuck in them, but she didn't mind. The deep green pine-forest camp unfurled in front of her. It was quite a calm feeling actually, being in a camp this well concealed.

But that wasn't to say it was perfect. Some areas of tree bark were scratched and peeled away, where cats had frantically climbed the trees to escape. One of the dens that wasn't bramble appeared to be trampled and ripped apart. It was between two logs that had clearly been positioned in such a way to create a long, thin den-space with warrior-enforced roofing structure above. The collapsed ceiling had holes and gaps, while one side of a log was completely crumpled into splinters. Crescentpaw slowed as she examined the Shadowclan camp's damage.

"Hurry up, apprentice." The dark she-cat scolded impatiently. Crescentpaw almost opened her mouth to spit a retort. *Darkflower's bossiness is getting old quickly.*

"A lot of our warriors left to be rogues or loners," The deputy surprised her by continuing.

"Shadowclan is too proud to become kittypets, you see." She meowed. "At least most of us were."

As they talked, they patiently waited for Plumetail to slowly stretch her neck up. The two she-cats sat close together as they packed the wound with fresh cobweb. The previous blood-soaked clot was gently pawed out and fell onto the ground. It smelled strongly of infection.

Crescentpaw sat on her haunches and leaned back to examine the work. When she was satisfied that the cobweb was securely plastered over the edge of the wound, she nodded.

"It's sealed over the edge, Darkflower. But isn't there any herbs you know of to stop her infection?" Crescentpaw cleaned her paws as she glanced over at the Shadowclan deputy. Her two-toned gaze was shrewd.

"Maybe tansy or goldenrod? I've heard Goldenheart mention it but I'm not certain if it's for infection or something else." Her tone was suggestive.

Darkflower leaned back, the sun glinting off her whiskers as she shook her head no.

"And just what might happen if I gave her the wrong herb, something that makes her throw up or go to sleep? That could make her even weaker!" The dark grey Shadowclan cat snarled. Her yellow fangs glinted as she snapped and swiveled her head to stare at Crescentpaw.

The Riverclan apprentice only sighed, glancing at her paws and back up at the Shadowclan deputy again. *Oops... I keep forgetting not to look at my paws in front of other cats.* Did it even matter, though? This was a cat from another clan. And the chances of anyone noticing her missing claws while sheathed were slim to none, as far as she could tell.

"Yeah good point." The apprentice eventually responded flatly.

She meant it, though. Darkflower was being cautious against accidentally hurting the elder.

"I'm not sure if she's well enough to fight off the infection on her own," the she-cat dropped her voice to a low murmur. Her tone had turned serious. A cloud passed over the sun, giving them some temporary relief from the swelling heat.

"Well...-" Crescentpaw sighed. Her paws were already itching to go. She had done so much talking over the past two days. She wanted

to act, not sit around and chat and worry. *I need to change things!*

"Okay, look." The tabby she-cat dropped her meowing into a whisper. "If Plumetail's infection improves and she regains her strength, cross the border to Riverclan. Meet me back at my camp. We've got to figure out what to do to reach Starclan. *They'll* know what to do," she pressed. Crescentpaw rushed on, eager to leave and make her way to Skyclan land.

"They may tell us to move all the clan territories, but we must keep what remains of the Clans alive until then. We-"

Darkflower didn't have the decency to let her finish. Her sun-warmed shoulders lifted abrasively. "Why?" She spat out the question, but Crescentpaw had a feeling the deputy didn't want an answer. She flattened her ears with exasperation when she was proved to be right.

"There's no hope left for Shadowclan anyways!" Darkflower meowed loudly.

Overwhelmed with perplexity, young Crescentpaw lifted a paw. When she finally responded she met the dark she-cat's glinting gaze meticulously.

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Crescentpaw

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[image] [image]

"How can you say that, Darkflower?" *It's pathetic how I'm more willing to fight for Shadowclan than Shadowclan's own deputy is!* She nearly had the gall to say it out loud.

If only I was a warrior so my opinion could be valued like one. Her gaze burned into the larger she-cat's.

But saying so will only make it worse. She compelled herself and brought her paws together in a mature manner.

"You're Shadowclan's deputy. You can easily go to Starclan and get nine lives for your clan-"

"WHAT CLAN?" Darkflower yowled, her voice ringing throughout the pine forest. Their lush needles lifted with the breeze, gently brushing together in the silence that followed.

Crescentpaw was pleased to now be the one saying, "Look. If you're Shadowclan's last hope, why would you throw that away?" she kept her voice a lot more level and calm than the deputy's had been. Her gaze was questioning and genuine, while Darkflower's was defensive and ill-tempered. The dark she-cat glared over Plumetail's ears at her.

"Oh. Miss know it all, I see." She cocked her head in a mocking gesture as she sneered. *Wow, I don't think many cats would've liked having her as a deputy. How did she even get appointed- did Gravelstar just have no other choices left?* It was almost funny. The apprentice had never seen a warrior act so aggressively childish.

"If you'd use your brain to think for a second, you'd realize that Gravelstar took some of his lives *with* him. He lost five of them fighting against the wolves. But the snake-heart took his other four and fled," she narrowed her eyes at Crescentpaw against the sun. It had reappeared with a vengeance, plunging the clearing into a

yellow radiance once again. Plumetail sighed contentedly while Crescentpaw wondered how she could stand the heat.

"What happened to your medicine cat?" She asked, thinking about a smaller tabby tom named Elmshade. She had seen the healer beside the roots of the Great Oak on her last gathering.

"Elmshade was killed a few moons ago, toward the end of leaf-bare." Darkflower lifted her head to further inspect Crescentpaw while she spoke.

"There were no new healer apprentices in Shadowclan before or after then?" Despite the bitter she-cat's previous retorts she wasn't afraid to ask more questions.

"We had one but they were killed as a kit. I'm sure you smelled the burial plots right outside camp when you approached them."

The apprentice shifted her paws, then looked up to meet her gaze. "Yeah. Why is it so close to camp though? That's not custom of Riverclan's burial sites," she pointed out.

"It's not custom of *any* clan!" Darkflower sounded increasingly impatient. She gnashed her teeth together as she said, "and it's because I'm only one cat, you know! I can't waste strength dragging them farther than that." Her voice grew ragged.

"The only reason Plumetail is in this state is—..." she took a deep breath. "-is because she couldn't make it up a pine fast enough. I managed to distract the wolf so she could get away; but it wasn't without consequence."

Crescentpaw's ears twitched. *She's been here alone with Plumetail for a long time.*

"My last kin- my son Nighthowl couldn't stand watching our clan die. He knew that there was no hope here. He got tired of burying the bodies. So he took his apprentice and left." She angrily swiped at the ground then turned her face away. Darkflower's shoulders were hunched as she went on. "And so did several other Shadowclan cats. So I'm going to do the same."

With her jaws facing the opposite direction of Plumetail's perked ears, she huskily dropped her voice. "If- When Plumetail dies, I'm going to leave this place. It's hard enough as it is. I have to hide in the trees at night, but leave her on the ground." She whispered urgently, and Crescentpaw leaned closer to catch her meows.

"I can't drag her up there with her injuries. I'm only one cat," the deputy repeated softly. The breeze settled as Plumetail baked on the earth. Her eyes were sticky and half-closed. Her lovely orange tail swished but then feebly twitched with pain. A meek moan of distress rattled from her chest, until the she-cat laid her head down on Crescentpaw's moss.

"You want moved out of the sun yet, Plumetail?"

The frail she-cat weakly muttered, "No." And opened her brilliant orange gaze wider to peer up at them. She was crouched with her paws tucked underneath her like a deer. Her white pelt was still unwashed and dusty in places, yet it shone in the dazzling sun.

"Okay." Crescentpaw nearly leaned forward to lick the elder's forehead, but then she realized how weird that was. She didn't even know her. Plus Darkflower might take it as an intruding display of overstepping boundaries.

"Well at least start eating your squirrel." The Shadowclan she-cat urged, rising to her paws and pushing it closer. After that she padded a few paw-steps away and right up to Crescentpaw's nose.

"Didn't you say you have somewhere else to be? Skyclan, right?" The tall deputy sounded scornful rather than interested.

"Yeah. But I have to know your full answer first. Are you sure you won't come with me to the other clans?" She corrected herself. "We can go back to Riverclan first, for Plumetail's sake."

The tabby-and-white apprentice inwardly cringed at the thought. *I'd have to explain everything to everyone, and then just go off the blind hope that they'd allow me to continue my mission.*

"We don't have a medicine cat, but I might find one on my trip

around the lake." Crescentpaw explained. "And she might be able to make it there before sundown, with our help of course. We'll have to go slow, but Riverclan territory is at least a lot more open than...this..." Crescentpaw trailed off as she saw Darkflower's hardened expression.

"I already told you that Shadowclan is done for. I'm going to do what most of my other clanmates did and go off to be a loner after this." Her mew was grating and firm.

"At least I stayed until the last clan member was left. I was loyal to the very end."

It disturbed Crescentpaw how she let a bit of pride creep into her voice. As if she were somehow better than her clanmates. *Maybe in a small way she is. Yet in a lot of ways she's not.* The Riverclan apprentice stared at the she-cat's burning bright gaze. *There's no point judging her any further.* She knew she had to go. If she was going to make it to all the other clan territories within two sunfalls she needed to average at least two a day. And it was now clear that Darkflower was a lost case.

Crescentpaw nodded acceptance at the she-cat before getting to her paws. She padded closer to Plumetail, giving the leftover squirrel meat near her paws a wide girth. *I'm sure Darkflower would pounce on me if I tried to even* breathe *anywhere near that. Not that I'm scared of her,* she told herself, lifting her muzzle and tail confidently.

Crescentpaw leaned down to nose-touch the older she-cat gently.

"It was nice seeing you again, Plumetail. Your fur still looks just as lovely." Crescentpaw murmured the compliment kindly. Even if the comment wasn't all the way true, Plumetail's mostly-clean flanks still shone a blinding snowy white in the sun. Her belly and legs were dirty and thin, but her bright orange tail was still a splash of citrus against the earth.

Plumetail didn't answer, and Crescentpaw didn't want her to. She looked the old she-cat regretfully in the eye before turning away. The elder looked tired and defeated, which only flattened Crescentpaw's enthusiasm even more.

No hope left for Shadowclan, then. She gave Darkflower a respectful nod and headed for the entrance tunnel.

"Don't come back," the deputy warned. "Either no cat will be here or you'll find both of our rotting corpses lying in camp."

The Riverclan apprentice didn't need to be told twice. She padded past the near-black she-cat with her hackles down. Shuffling through the exit path and out into Shadowclan's thick pined forest, she looked up at the sun.

Crescentpaw had quite a few hours left before sundown. Despite feeling like it, their chat hadn't taken too long. She loped into a running bound, puffing as she adjusted to the faster gait.

Deep green pines flashed past. Their layered pelts of abundant needles swept by on the edge of her vision. *I don't have time to travel down to the lakeshore and then back up into Skyclan land again. I'm heading straight there.*

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Crescentpaw

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[image]

As the ground rose and then dipped, Crescentpaw padded down the steep side of a brambled slope. Her white paws got muddy again, and she began slipping as she nearly fell into a grass hillock. The apprentice wasn't used to Shadowclan territory and was forced to slow down after that.

It was nearly an hour later when the tabby-and-white she-cat finally stalked across the Shadowclan-Skyclan border. Both sides had weakened scent-markings; but Shadowclan's much more predominantly so. Crescentpaw nearly stepped on two frogs. Despite her hunger, the animals smelled so peaty and fetid that she didn't try to catch one.

She had forgotten that at the utmost top of the lake, Thunderclan Shadowclan and Skyclan's camps were all much closer together. Although their territories were long and vast, they were more vertically stretched than Riverclan's seemed to be.

I love our clan so much. It's got the Horseplace separating us from Windclan, and the Small Thunderpath separating us from Shadowclan. The borders were also much more recognizable.

The apprentice caught wind of overlapping scent trails leading towards the Skyclan camp.
She paid attention to the twittering birdsong up in the trees, pricking her ears.

Birds were not Riverclan's specialty, but Crescentpaw was beginning to grow desperately hungry. Traveling so far without any traveling herbs was taking its toll.

But I can't hunt in another Clan's land, even if I had the claws to try. Especially when Skyclan's border markers were fresh. She sighed aloud. It was such a beautiful day for hunting.

Despite her rumbling belly she felt proud of herself for already reaching the second clan's territory. *I should stumble upon their camp soon.* Crescentpaw had been padding on Skyclan's land for quite some time now. Massive oak trees with gnarled roots had replaced most of the pines. Their bark was much lighter and drier, smooth and thick with less crevices.

Barely any sunlight reached through the thick tree canopy above. Crescentpaw found it reassuring, though. Until she remembered that she wouldn't be able to climb *any* of these trees if she needed to.

I hope Tinypaw and Cheetah are doing alright. If Tinypaw is found out while I'm gone she might be thrown out before I return. And Cheetah could end up annoying the wrong cat...

Not to mention the more-likely-than-not chances of a wolf visiting the camp tonight.

"Hey, you!" The overpowering leafy scent of Skyclan bathed Crescentpaw's nostrils as she panicked and looked around. Instinctively the apprentice tried to unsheathe her claws. Nothing slid out of the sheathe sockets and she was forced to stand there with her hackles lifted and eyes wide, neck twisting around like a frantic pigeon.

A group of cats appeared over the swell of earth behind her. They climbed over it with confident pawsteps, padding closer and closer as they glided beneath the trees.

The patrol consisted of two she-cats and a hulking thick-furred tom.

"You're Riverclan aren't you? What are you doing here?" The long-haired cat sounded hostile. Giant scars crisscrossed his jaw and muzzle. Both of his ears had rips. One foreleg still had a long, bloodied tooth gash. Most of the leg was covered with a plaster of goldenrod. The rest had fallen off, revealing a snaking wound underneath.

"I'm, uh." Crescentpaw's eyes were widening even farther as she recognized Jadestar. The Skyclan leader had distinguishable pale-

grey fur with interloping patches of tan-yellow. Each splash of tan was scored with darker tabby lines, as per usual of a calico-type cat.

Part of the leader's tail was ripped off and bald; showing an ugly bruise and lesions beneath. Her left eyebrow was striated with deep-etched teeth marks. Dried blood still stained the soot-colored fur.

"Jadestar!" She gasped and nearly fell to the forest floor with relief. *Thank Starclan there's still a Clan leader left.*

"State your business," the tomcat in their group growled.

"I'm Crescentpaw, so yes I'm Riverclan." she quickly explained as the dark warrior beside Jadestar lifted a brow. His haunches were so big that they were practically larger than Crescentpaw's head.

"I've come to discuss the predator problem with the other Clans. Since gatherings are closed, traversing territories is the only way." She carried on. "Have any of you made contact with Starclan in recent moons?"

"No," the large tom murmured. His apprentice shook her head. Then Jadestar murmured "I haven't. Last time I went was moons ago. The Moonpool was blank and it reflected no stars and granted no dreams." Her whiskers drooped while Crescentpaw frowned. *The longer I look at her, the more scars I notice in-between her fur.*

Crescentpaw felt like she ought to know the other cat's names. The tomcat's name was on the tip of her tongue.

"Who are you two?"

"I'm Sootface and this is Rainpaw. She's my daughter." Sootface mewed gruffly. His blocky head was mostly black. A dark slate-grey covered the rest of him, down to his black tailtip. The tom's ashen fur edged with charcoal ebony fufilled his name.

While Rainpaw awkwardly shifted her blue-gray paws, Crescentpaw wondered where the she-cat's mentor was.

"It's nice to meet you, Rainpaw." The young feline looked to be a

little older than herself. And yet she had no scars along her short, pretty pelt.

And why is she still an apprentice?

Rainpaw politely mewed the same, but her hackles were frightfully fluffed. She averted her gaze with a bashful half-smile.

She doesn't want me to pry. Crescentpaw gave the she-cat more space and looked around at Skyclan's forest. The tightly-packed trees were full of multicolored twittering birds all around them. A few emerald leaves spiraled down beyond the standing cats. They twirled around in semi-circles before landing softly on the light-dappled forest floor.

The undergrowth was sprawling but low and partly clear. Vines wrapped up and around trees, clinging to their trunks with resting ivy stems. Crescentpaw even saw a squirrel in a dip among the forest floor between two pine trees. It was several rabbit-bounds off and distorted by the distance and angle. Bushy tail twitching, the squirrel sat up with something in its front paws.

"Crescentpaw, listen." Jadestar spoke up. Her piercing green eyes matched some of the forestry around them.

"I can understand Riverclan wanting to converse with the other clans." Her expression looked disdainful. "But we haven't had any warriors to spare."

"You've got more than Shadowclan. I just came from there." Crescentpaw declared, looking at the leader with arrogance in her gaze.

"No- you don't understand. We have literally no warriors left. It's just us, Hillflower, Pepperpelt and her two kits."

"...Isn't Sootface a warrior?" The apprentice questioned. "And what about Cinderpatch?" She remembered Skyclan's grey-and-white deputy. He had been small for a Skyclan warrior.

"Cinderpatch died and I appointed Sootface my deputy. He went to Starclan because of infectious wounds last leafbare," Jadestar

explained.

The apprentice nearly groaned. *Not again! But...wait.*

Hillflower! *She's a medicine cat.* Crescentpaw felt her tail-tip flip with joy. Her two-colored eyes stared up at the Skyclan leader with hope.

Rainpaw stilled. She tilted her head curiously but didn't speak, while Jadestar and Sootface looked at each other. Their gazes were shaded by the giant ferns that drooped partly over them.

Sootface looked at her skeptically. "Do you think we're weak?" Ears flattening, Crescentpaw rushed to explain herself.

"No! *I'm glad* you have a medicine cat and leader left. Riverclan and Shadowclan don't, you see." Three-leaved clovers were sprouted around their paws, a blinding shade of green that turned neon in the sun.

She dipped her head briefly, respectfully meowing "And I'm sorry about your fallen clanmates as well as Cinderpatch."

I didn't expect Skyclan to have no warriors or elders left, though. Did this mean that the other clans were suffering more than Riverclan was?

"Don't talk about it," Sootface muttered, while Jadestar shot him a look that could burn the bark off a tree.

A fierce breeze rocked the treetops above. Jadestar was examining her with a more critical gaze.

Are the wolves everywhere around the lake? Then where do they live and where are their dens? Then she realized that no clan cat would be able to escape the predators after finding out. Which is why they needed Starclan advice.

Crescentpaw squared her shoulders and met the leader's gaze composedly. *I can't lose my cool or act like a 'know-it-all.'* She almost rolled her eyes, remembering Darkflower's temper. Angled sunbeams slathered dappled light across her shoulders.

"Will you come back to Riverclan with me for an attempt at reaching Starclan?" The apprentice peacefully asked. "I'm gathering what's left of the other clans as well. We need to send cats on a quest to the Moonpool."

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~if you have one, which Clan is your favorite clan?~

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[image]

"Do you mean *all* of Skyclan?" Jadestar mewed cautiously. "Because I can't split up what's left of my clan like that." The calico's diluted cream-and-grey fur was ruffled. She closed her jaws to listen for Crescentpaw's answer, fronds waving behind her.

"I would prefer all of your clanmates come. As you're saying, it would be safer that way. If all of us temporarily join up on one Clan's territory, we can come up with a strategy to contact Starclan." Crescentpaw licked a paw and drew it over her whiskers as she talked. It was cool beside the undergrowth shielding them the from sunlight.

Jadestar nodded. The forestry rustled around them. The scent of hickory sap was sharp on the fitfull wind. Air hardly penetrated the thick trees, causing a damp heat to settle across their backs. Yet in here, Crescentpaw didn't have to squint her eyes. There was plenty of shade to shield them from the strong sunlight. And the ground beneath her paws was cool and smooth, rather than prickly and uneven like in Shadowclan land.

"It sounds like a plan. My top priority is to keep my remaining clanmates alive, but of course we seek Starclan's will." Crescentpaw twitched her ears, holding onto her patience wisely. "Great."

She was raring to get going. Deep green shadows pooled underneath the ferns that were gathered in growing heaps behind them. She whisked her thick tabby tail.

If they left now they might make it to Thunderclan territory before nightfall. *But is that wise?* She didn't know. In Riverclan the wolves were more likely to attack you at sundown or after.

"Why did your clanmates send an apprentice across the territories instead of a warrior?" Jadestar interrupted her thoughts.

"That's hardly important," she mewed, hoping to start stressing the essence of time.

Sootface looked offended, but Crescentpaw didn't mind. As huge as the Tom seemed to be, he didn't seem like much. He hardly ever held gaze with anyone when he spoke, and still wasn't looking directly at her now.

"I have a question while we walk back to camp for your other Clanmates." Crescentpaw ushered them forward, but she didn't even know what direction to go. Sootface's hackles sprang up in offense.

"Jadestar, are you Rainpaw's mentor?" Since Sootface was her father, the dark-black tabby-and-white she-cat assumed that Jadestar must be her mentor.

"Ah, no." Jadestar looked faintly embarrassed as she turned toward the direction of camp. She trotted along on powerful hind legs. Despite her thick muscle tones the she-cat's pawsteps hardly made a sound. "Rainpaw is actually mine *and* Sootface's kit. We lost her littermates a few moons ago." Jadestar looked over at her... *mate*? with distain; if that's what he still was.

Huh. "Oh..." she trailed off uncertainly.

They probably lost their other kits to the wolves. And maybe Jadestar blamed him for it? Crescentpaw couldn't tell. But the Skyclan leader was still glaring at her deputy right now.

After a moment, Sootface noticed and gave his own deprecatory grunt.

"Are we going?" He said, his voice full of contempt.

She bounded over to Jadestar's side, following the leader through flattened undergrowth. A lick of wind whooshed through Skyclan's trees and across her back, tugging Crescentpaw's ears back and teeming with the scent of forest prey. Her jaws began to water.

"Pepperpelt is her mentor, but she's caring for her kits right now. So we have been her acting mentors." Jadestar explained as they walked into an illuminated shaft of sunlight. Little sprinkles of

pollen flitted throughout the sunbeams.

Blue-grey Rainpaw turned her head away. She looked on as if she had nothing she wanted to add to the conversation.

"So... you're the leader and deputies kit?" Crescentpaw pried. She couldn't help being ever so curious.

"Yeah," the smaller she-cat said minimally. Crescentpaw could tell that she was very shy, and so turned her attention back to Jadestar.

"I'm sorry about your kittens." The apprentice said sympathetically. She didn't lay it on thicker than that, though. Jadestar nodded with pale-green eyes briefly closed.

The four clan cats padded underneath expansive tree canopy together. Sootface trailed at the rear.

Grasshoppers bounced up from their footfalls, scattering away when they were disturbed by the cats ambles. Rainpaw timidly stepped over a thin stream on the way there, looking over at Crescentpaw anxiously but not saying a word.

Skyclan territory was very hilly. Crescentpaw crossed several rises and dips. With the patrol's guidance she skirted wildflower clumps and blackberry bushes, then followed a well-worn trail through the woods. The maple trees with Cypress vines wrapped around their trunks were hulking, unmoving figures. A few of the pines from Shadowclan land also spilled into Skyclan land, which became more prevalent as the cats made their way North. She passed a few clumps of strong-smelling Goldenrod, but was too inexperienced to indentify them.

When they made it to the Skyclan camp Crescentpaw was surprised by how high up it was. The other clans had their camps closer to the Lake. *But this is a good idea. It prevents flooding during the rainy moons.*

It was Jadestar who led way through the open entrance, a raised footpath with a ditch full of leaves beside it. The other side hosted a twisted mound of oak tree roots that were stretching far into camp.

Pine trees surrounding the edge of the neat clearing all had snapped-off lower branches, providing as much open space on the ground as possible. The canopy above was crowded, providing admirable coverage; to where hardly a single Skyclan cat would've had to sit in the sun. *And less attacks from hawks.*

Cedar and juniper grew in swathes amongst the edges, bordering a small waterfall along one edge that was ridged with flat stones. The camp looked like some sort of restful oasis, with a couple low-hanging hazel tree branches stretching their widespread leaves down low and cooling the camp's floors. The dome felt safe and well-protected, despite the fact that Crescentpaw could see battered den walls amongst the warrior- made camps.

There were massive gaps between various tree-roots, cleared out and broadened in order to provide nest spaces inside. They were screened with drooping willow fronds. Other dens were dug into hillocks and well-circulated by having broad entrances. They were reinforced with twigs and bark, plastered all along the edges so that the den entrance wouldn't fall in on itself. Giant butterbur leaves were plastered to the entrance tops with dried mud, providing a screen of shade as you entered the den.

This camp was in better condition than Crescentpaw's own. She enviously looked over at Jadestar, waiting for the she-cat to make the first move.

"Pepperpelt! Cloverkit! Oatkit!" The Skyclan leader yowled, and almost at once two kits hurled from between the strong roots of a giant elm tree. They darted around a pine and through the shorter grasses up to their leader.

"Wow! Look at her eyes, Cloverkit. They're so cool!"

A speckled grey she-cat emerged from the den after them. There was a wide partially healed bite-wound stretched across her neck and lower jaw. The scab looked itchy and dry. It veered off of her jugular on one side.

She got lucky the wolf missed her throat.

"Hey, Jadestar." The she-cat halted with caution as she spotted Crescentpaw. "What's she doing here? And why does she smell like Riverclan?" The queen's eyes were wide and apprehensive.

"Because she is," Sootface sounded exasperated. The apprentice was beginning to wonder if that was just a common trait of his. She nonchalantly looked over at the kits while Jadestar explained.

One tomkit was bright yellow-orange, with very faint stripes along his flank. He had a white tail-tip. His legs were slightly lighter, but otherwise the kit was completely solid-colored.

His littermate was a smaller bi-colored she-cat. She batted at her brothers ears and pounced on his thin tail. Her spiky white fur turned black in places, giving the little kitten a dipped-in-mud appearance.

Neither kit had any newborn-fluff left behind their ears. They leaped and rolled with the expertise of long-legged nimble apprentices. As the kits tumbled and dodged in a play-fight at their mother's paws, Crescentpaw looked up.

"They look far past old enough to become apprentices." This time Crescentpaw didn't bother to hide her confusion, she just said it out loud.

Rainpaw

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[image]

[image]

Cloverkit

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continue for chapter

"Because they are," Jadestar sighed regretfully. "We haven't got any mentors to give them."

Crescentpaw tilted her head.

"Why don't both of you mentor one apiece?"

"Because we've got our paws full being acting mentors to our daughter, defending our camp, marking the borders-."

"Why not let their mother mentor Rainpaw? And then you would have time to mentor one of her kits." She couldn't help interrupting. The solution seemed simple, right there in front of them so effortlessly that even a mouse could reach out and grab it. Sootface growled impatiently, but it wasn't him who spoke up.

"You're a Riverclan apprentice," Jadestar began condescendingly. "So don't start thinking you can advise me on my mentoring methods." Her meow was strained and testy.

"Nothing like that. It was just a suggestion." *I was just trying to give the most obvious of advice. Great Starclan.*

"Another one would be that you could assign them as apprentices anyways, with or without acting mentors. Then assign official ones

before their assessments later on," she pushed.

Rainpaw was shaking her head with an alarmed gaze, but Crescentpaw didn't notice. The two kittens had stopped playing, and together they walked up with excited and hopeful gleaming eyes.

"I want to be an apprentice! Please, Jadestar?" Oatkit trilled strongly, his voice ringing out across camp. His small fluffy tail was stuck straight up behind him, while his sister stuck out her tongue and said, "Me too! I've waited AGES!"

"Stop that," Pepperpelt scolded. Jadestar's gaze grew exasperated as she whipped her head towards Crescentpaw and remarked, "You know nothing about matters like these." She was nearly hissing. The Riverclan apprentice flattened her ears, hackles rising uncomfortably.

"How am I supposed to preach about Starclan's will up on the flat-rock when no cat even knows if they still watch over us? I can't ask the clan ancestors to '*watch over these apprentices'* when they might die the next day!" Ferns twitched in the breeze behind her lashing tail.

Jadestar's eyes narrowed and her chest heaved as she calmed herself down and then said, "They're safer staying as they are."

That's not fair to the kits. This is absurd..! Her jaws were itching to release the words and say it.

"Didn't you say we have to go somewhere, Jadestar?" Pepperpelt asked. The treetops rustled above them, branches gently creaking against one another. She moved closer to her kits and swept them near with her tail. They protested loudly, trying to jump beyond the confines of their mother's boundary.

"Yes, we're all going to the Riverclan camp for a deliberation with the other clans." Jadestar confirmed for her.

Or what's left of them, Crescentpaw thought rationally.

"I have to admit it isn't any safer over on that side of the lake than

it is over here." She shuffled her paws and glanced up at the dropping sun.

"Right, we understand that." Sootface nodded and flexed his forelegs, glancing over at Jadestar. Crescentpaw scrunched her nose and looked away.

"After that we're going to send some cats to the Moonpool to communicate with Starclan. Sending one or two cats has never worked before. It's my understanding that Riverclan wants to send a whole patrol with all five clan cats, right?"

Crescentpaw nodded. *Basically yeah*. "Besides Shadowclan. Darkflower and Plumetail said they've... given up hope. Because Gravelstar fled to become a kittypet."

"Well, that's some news." Pepperpelt twitched her whiskers with amusement, then sat down to groom her paws.

"We've got to go now if we want to make Thunderclan territory by sunset," Crescentpaw meowed urgently. Her own paws were muddy and she had a layer of dust settled on her pelt, but she knew they had to keep moving.

"Let us fetch Hillflower first. She's in the medicine cat's underground cave, so she can't hear us." Jadestar then sat down and looked over at her daughter.

"Rainpaw, fetch Hillflower."

"What about my kits?" Pepperpelt mewed as Rainpaw moved away. *Apprentices*, Crescentpaw thought, but she didn't want to waste more time arguing.

"We'll protect them. We just have to pass by Thunderclan and Windclan on our way back to Riverclan."

The promise felt like an empty one. Her, protect what? *With no front claws?*

Pepperpelt looked skeptical, and glanced at her kits nervously before herding them closer.

Despite these thoughts she wasn't any less eager to get the journey over with. Crescentpaw truly believed that she was going to help save the clans... or at least play some sort of role in it. *I'll finish this by myself if I have to.*

It was odd, really. It wasn't that she felt invincible or that she couldnt't die; she was very much aware that that might happen.

The tabby-and-white apprentice simply realized that some cat had to do it. Before the clans died out. Before all the leaders fell. Before their ties to Starclan were cut off.

And if some cat had to do it then it might as well be her.

A clawless apprentice barred from a warrior name who was going to try and achieve the impossible.

"Can we please stop to check their wounds now?" Hillflower fretted over at Crescentpaw. The medicine cat dropped her herb bundle to verbalize. She was small for a Skyclan cat, with broad but short legs; and a petite rounded head.

Crescentpaw faltered and gave an uncertain, "Uh, yeah. But quickly please." The tabby-and-white she-cat was too distracted to utter more. All of the cats behind her slowed to a stop.

They were almost encroaching upon Thunderclan territory. In fact, she thought they should've passed the border by now. Bramble thickets were almost everywhere, with thick clots of fern and wild-grown ryegrass stretching high above the cat's backs. In most places they had to maneuver around such foliage, which was adding more time to their travels.

Crescentpaw was frustrated by the fact that they couldn't just walk *straight there*. Some of the Skyclan cats were small and lithe enough to slip underneath or between the bramble thickets and hazel bushes; but Crescentpaw herself was too clumsy, large and

inexperienced to make way like that.

Jadestar had been following behind Crescentpaw, but she now paused to look back at her clanmates.

"You should be asking *me* when we can stop, Hillflower." Jadestar sounded shrewd and cross at the same time.

"She's your leader," Sootface agreed with a grunt while Rainpaw stayed silent. Hillflower gazed impartially at the taller Jadestar, nodding. She then began peeling a layer of plastered cobweb off the wounds on Jadestar's tail.

"Yes, sorry. I only asked Crescentpaw because she's leading the way."

"She shouldn't be, though. She's only an apprentice." Sootface cut in again, his meows turning harsh and grating.

Crescentpaw's hackles began to rise, but clearly none of the other clan cats wanted to speak next. It stretched into a strained silence as she flicked her tail.

"I'm actually of warrior age. I just don't have a leader or deputy to appoint me as one; and no mentor to conduct an assesment."

'Only an apprentice.' I can't wait until the day that I can't be called that anymore! Why is it used as an insult? She kept her gaze bold and level with the other cats, shoulders stiff.

The kits that were previously gossiping behind Pepperpelt ran up to her, exchanging a glance at the random tension. Then Cloverkit opened her jaws and mewed "You have really cool eyes!" The black-and-white kit repeated what her brother had said earlier.

"Is your name Crescentpaw for that weird-shaped white mark on your face?" Oatkit asked.

She leaned down and began tugging out the bramble thorns that were stuck in her tail. "Yes."

"Cool! My name is Oatkit because I'm the color of oatgrass in late

Greenleaf. At least that's what my mom told me. I haven't seen it turn a golden-yellow color yet." He blinked his large flaxen-colored eyes at her.

"I'm Cloverkit because I have green eyes and-... because I have a cute name, ummm and 'cause I'm popular and everyone searches me out because I'm lucky." Cloverkit puffed out her chest with importance.

Crescentpaw flicked her ears, feeling amused. She could tell that Cloverkit made that up on the spot. The tuxedo she-cat's eyes matched all of the forestry around her.

"Perfect names," Crescentpaw purred and waved her tail. "I can tell that both of you would make amazing Skyclan apprentices. Have you thought about your *warrior* names yet, though?"

The two kit's eyes widened as they turned to each other and then began shaking with excitement.

"Clovershine. Cloverleaf. Clovereyes. Clover-." Cloverkit raised a paw and began gossiping into her brother's ear.

Crescentpaw glanced over at the adult cats, who were no longer quarreling.

"Alright, make sure to try and keep this cobweb patch stuck on your eye." Hillflower was saying. "If it keeps falling off then the bleeding is going to persist."

"How much farther until the Thunderclan border?" The tabby-and-white apprentice asked.

"We already crossed it." Sootface mewed bluntly.

She frowned, lifting her tail and turning toward the heart of Thunderclan's deeper territory.

"They haven't marked their borders or sent out patrols for moons. Last we heard they had left for some other territory," he went on.

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[image] [image]

Crescentpaw (art by PuddlePuff)

Crescentpaw's eyes widened. "Did they leave without Starclan's will?" A breeze rolled across her back, cooling the warm fur atop her shoulders. While Hillflower rolled up her herb bundle the cats padded around a thorn bush and skirted a gorse thicket, heading for the Thunderclan camp.

"Yes," the medicine cat answered.

"Did they say why?"

"To preserve what was left of their clan," Sootface said knowledgeably. Crescentpaw's eyes were wide as she continued to listen. "Antlerstar crossed the top of our territory on his way out, saw a patrol and told them his clan was in ruins."

"Where did they go?" Oatkit asked for her. The kit's neck was bent at an angle to look up at them.

"He said they were going to try living at an ancient clan territory." Hillflower explained. "Somewhere the clans used to live that was eventually destroyed by Twolegs-except for Riverclan's old land."

I wonder if that ended up working.

Crescentpaw padded through some long sedge-grass stems and missed a trailing vine of ivy. It wrapped around her paws and tugged off of the tree from where it had overgrown and spilled onto the forest floor.

"I doubt they made it there," Jadestar commented. "But if they did they would've had to join Warriorclan or chase them out."

Sootface ducked to avoid the trailing ivy stems himself, while Crescentpaw kicked the same type of ones from around her legs.

"Who's Warriorclan?" Oatkit asked, climbing on top of his sister to be seen better.

"Now's not the time to explain it," Pepperpelt sighed. "I'll tell you later. Besides, they could just be an old clan myth."

While Oatkit and Cloverkit complained, Rainpaw spoke up. Her paws lifted high and stepped expertly, avoiding every trailing bramble stem or fallen twig that crossed her path.

"But some cats say that the Sisters are a myth. And they aren't, are they?"

Crescentpaw had heard tales of both. She'd listened to the run-down about where the clans used to live, and why they had left their previous territories- and other groups of cats they had come across before and during their time at the Lake.

"I know they aren't. We've met the sisters on our travels to the Moonpool; didn't we Jadestar?" Hillflower said. She glanced at the grey-and-tan Skyclan leader.

"Yes." Jadestar nodded. "My mother has seen them once as well. They're a timeless generation of she-cats, as old as the clans themselves it seems."

Crescentpaw looked ahead. The forest slope inclined beneath her paws. She descended the dip and then padded beside some spreading clumps of hogweed.

She was thinking about Thunderclan. *If two entire clans have left or given up hope... does that mean the other clans should as well?*

Then the she-cat felt a stir of resilience. Deep down she knew that Shadowclan and Thunderclan could be revived. *It must have been done before. Especially if the clans have existed for as long as Jadestar says.*

"You remember that one warrior that stayed behind, mother?" Rainpaw began conversing more than she ever had since Crescentpaw met her. "The one we found while we were hunting on Thunderclan's land early new-leaf, while the prey was still coming

back."

All of a sudden Jadestar looked embarrassed. Her eyes glanced across at Crescentpaw as if remembering she were still there. She gave her daughter a stern look, licking her chest-fur.

"Er.. yes. His name was Trufflefur."

The she-cat's tone sounded heavily condescending, as if she didn't want this topic to be mentioned anymore. When Jadestar moved off again the rest of the cats followed behind her. Crescentpaw made sure to stay near the rear. She could smell prey-scents on the wind.

"Smells like he's been here, too." Sootface said after tapering off the trail and peering around a widespread hazel tree. It's topmost branches were bathed in golden sunlight. As they passed through an overgrown clearing among the forestry, Crescentpaw felt relieved. *No more brambles snagging on my tail.*

She approached behind Sootface and opened her mouth to taste the air. The golden-orange light spilling across their backs lit the edges of their fur with a brilliant glow. Crescentpaw's white patches weren't the brightest, however- covered with a thin layer of dust and pollen that she would have to clean off later on.

"Sundown is approaching rapidly. We should probably head for Thunderclan's camp rather than looking for him. It's safer there," the apprentice meowed with a concerned glance back at the unapprenticed kits.

"I agree," Pepperpelt meowed with concern.

Oatkit was waggling his haunches, preparing to jump on a ragged clump of weeds. His mother interrupted him, leading him closer to the clearing with a nudge. He pouted while following behind her.

"No need," a tom's voice rang out confidently. Crescentpaw swiveled her head around, confused. It sounded like it was coming from the treetops, not the ground.

"Up here," came the voice again. Jadestar and the other cats craned their necks, too- until Crescentpaw saw movement amongst the

rough-edged bark of a towering elm tree.

The Thunderclan tom was crouched on a robust branch that jutted partway out into the glade. His belly was pressed against bark. He had something furry and grey pinned beneath a forepaw; presumably a squirrel.

With calm cobalt eyes blinking the tom waved his tail in a friendly manner.

"Oh- hey Trufflefur. We couldn't see you because your pelt is nearly the same color as-"

"Come down from there, Thunderclan warrior."
Jadestar interrupted her daughter and the blue-gray apprentice bashfully snapped her jaws shut.

"We have a few questions to ask you." Jadestar's tone was full of authority.

Trufflefur

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[image] [image]

Trufflefur began clawing his way backwards, practically sliding down the tree. When he came close enough to leap from the trunk with the squirrel in his jaws, Jadestar spoke again.

"Have any of your clanmates returned since we last heard from you?" The Skyclan leader's voice was gruff. *She sounds like she doesn't want to ask him.*

"No," Trufflefur still sounded out of breath when he answered, his thin brown tail waving. "I've still been here... hunting by myself."

"Why didn't you go with them?" Crescentpaw asked. Even after all eyes were turned on her she kept looking at the muscular brown tom. The Riverclan she-cat couldn't help it. Her curiosity was too much to bear.

"I don't want to discuss that... At least not right now," Trufflefur gave an apologetic half-shrug and carried on. "But as for why I haven't tried to leave and *re*-join them... Well, let's just say that I feel closer to Thunderclan's roots here. I feel like Starclan is still nearby and they haven't moved or left us."

Crescentpaw nodded. "That makes sense." She heard the kits begin to bicker behind her. Oatkit yowled "GET OFF MY TAIL!" and then she heard Cloverkit laugh.

"How many clanmates did you have left before they all fled, Trufflefur?" She felt no embarrassment in asking the question.

"Like almost none."

The dark tabby apprentice sighed. "Alright... I'm sorry for your losses."

He looked placid as he sat down. "It isn't your fault."

Lengthier shadows were gathering behind her. Crescentpaw looked up and caught a clear glimpse of the sky.

One end of the striated atmosphere was a deep rosy pink. Clouds laid in puckered waves across it, scenic and tranquil as the breeze loftily tugged them along.

However, one end of the horizon was dark as twilight began its descent.

"We've got to get going." A drag of wind lifted her tail-fluff. "Trufflefur, will you allow us to stay in the Thunderclan camp tonight? I've got some more things to explain, but I'd rather not stay exposed with the apprentices like this." She stood there with her two-toned eyes slanted against the dying light.

"My *kits*," Pepperpelt corrected, looking over at her with a confused glance. Crescentpaw ignored her, knowing she was acting delusional. *Doesn't she know it's possible to have the title of both?*

Rainpaw's blue-gray pelt twitched along her spine. She looked uncomfortable, exchanging a glance with the brown Thunderclan tom.

"Yeah, but... well I can't offer the best of sleeping conditions. Just follow me and I'll show you." Crescentpaw nodded and prepared to trail behind him.

🐈‍⬛

On the rest of the way to Thunderclan's hollow she told Trufflefur about the state of her clan. Crescentpaw eventually got to the part about her mission, and Riverclan's ultimate goal of reaching Starclan with the other clans help.

Upon hearing this the tom's eyes lit up. Crescentpaw noticed that the kits did as well, and they all gathered closer around her to listen. Their expressions were wide and open with the prospect of hope and wonder.

"Of course I'll help!" Trufflefur said enthusiastically. "I'll represent

what's left of Thunderclan- at least from over here." He blinked his cerulean-blue eyes thoughtfully.

Crescentpaw was warmed to hear the kindest acceptance of her proposal yet. She gave a short purr but continued focusing on the space ahead of her. Not too long ago she had walked straight into a thorn bush. There was still a couple of thorns nestled deep in her chest-fur. *I'll need help pulling those out later. I guess I can ask Hillflower.*

The expansive tree canopy blotted out most of the dying light above them. One or two starlings chattered from amongst the highest tree branches, but they were well out of a cat's reach.

When they padded down Thunderclan's sloping stone entrance and into the ravine-like hollow Crescentpaw became completely captivated. Her ears twitched and she swiveled her head to look all around.

The perspective was much different than it had been from the topmost edges of the hollow. Up there the grass was overgrown. But down here there was almost none.

Instead, the crumbly grit underpaw didn't feel as natural. There was no loose earth to cushion her pads.

Hardly any air stirred a whisker. It wasn't easy for a gust of wind to reach these depths, below the topsoil's natural levels. Yet the stone alone was enough to reflect most of the heat. It felt surprisingly cool beneath her paws, especially as she walked around and passed through the camp's shaded areas.

"Wow, Thunderclan camp is really empty." Cloverkit meowed. She licked her chest and then walked in a semi-circle around a thick clump of gorse. The plant was overgrown from between a fissure in the rock beneath their paws.

"And creepy!" Oatkit said with his faded yellow-orange tail stuck up behind him. He bounded away from Pepperpelt and up to a pile of boulders beneath a sloping cliff edge.

"That's their highledge up there." Jadestar looked at a jutting outcrop of stone high above the cat's heads. "And behind that stone is a cave opening for the leader's den."

"Awesome!" Oatkit declared. His squeaky mew was almost drowned out by a loud chirping cricket. The insects began their symphony one-by-one in the taller grasses behind them.

Crescentpaw only glanced at the rock ledge, for she was too busy looking on toward the dens. She spotted a giant fallen tree that had flaky, rotting bark. Most of the branches had snapped or disintegrated off, replaced with crumbling hunks of dead wood.

Beside it was a thick tangle of heaped brambles. They appeared intact, but when Crescentpaw leaned closer all she could scent was stale nests inside. She looked toward the adjacent wall, which had a broad thorn bush growing out of a crack along the edge. Its branches were spread wide and high, and had lichen draped over the outermost edges to create a concave denspace inside.

It looked like a warriors or apprentices den. When the she-cat ducked her head inside she found only dusty, flattened bracken nests, and retreated immediately.

The other dens looked to be the same way. As sunset fell Crescentpaw's hackles began to stand on end. She lowered her head and fidgeted, trying to force herself into a quick grooming session.

This isn't good. I thought I would've gathered a full team of warriors by now. Do we stand any chance of making it the rest of the way around the lake? Her paws itched to keep moving, yet at the same time they were dragging wearily.

Is it just pure luck that I didn't come across any wolves today? Or do they hunt over here less since there's less cats to left to kill? Crescentpaw frowned while she thought to herself. The stress was causing her forehead to ache.

"We ought to climb the trees now and try to sleep for the night," Sootface growled suddenly. His meows were filled with warning. "These oak branches should be broad enough to support us."

Pepperpelt groaned. "I suppose so, but my spine always hurts *so much* when I wake up."

Crescentpaw hunched her shoulders. She tried to forcefully smooth her ruffled fur back down, but it was spiking with panic.

I can't climb a tree. And I sure can't attempt to in front of all of them!

_____

Pepperpelt

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[image]
[image]

I'll have to think of some excuse. But what? Maybe uh- I'll say I ripped a claw and it hurts too badly to climb. Yeah, I'll pretend to fall off the tree as soon as I start. I'll- but Hillflower! Her chest swelled with trepidation.

I can't do that because Hillflower will examine my 'ripped claw...'!

"I hate sleeping curled up in a tree branch. Can't you guys protect us?" Cloverkit meowed, her gaze resting on Crescentpaw.

Thank you, Cloverkit! Make your eyes bigger and cuter and more pleading.

She smiled down at the little kit while panic was threatening to swell her throat shut. Crescentpaw tried to hide the look of previous horror that had been on her face.

"Yeah!" Oatkit came to stand beside his sister. "We don't wanna sleep in no stinky old tree!"

The apprentice's fur finally smoothed back down. She thought it was cute that Cloverkit already looked to her for protection. *If she's the only cat here who thinks I'm more than just an apprentice, I'll take it.* Some of her worry flitted away like a snake disappearing into a crevice.

Trufflefur looked embarrassed. "Sorry. That's where I've been sleeping so the wolves can't get me at night."

"Mmm- well..." Sootface gazed down at the much smaller Cloverkit. He looked like he wanted to be stern, with the same recurring frown set deep along his jaw.

"Actually, it might be a good idea. Cats sleeping in trees for days certainly isn't ideal nor is it healthy; as it alters our bodies natural resting positions." Hillflower said matter-of-factly.

"Skyclan has been sleeping in trees?"

Maybe that's why their dens were in better condition. The wolves didn't destroy them because there was no scent of cats inside. Crescentpaw waited for an answer, but Jadestar's responding mew was interrupted.

"I won't risk my kits by sleeping in a nest on the ground." Pepperpelt growled. Her grey-flecked ears were flat with repulsion. The sunfall shadows darkened her pelt to near-black.

"That's not what she meant, Pepperpelt," Jadestar interjected.

"We can sleep in the leaders den up on the Highledge. Trufflefur, can the wolves manage to climb up there?"

"Yes, they can. But if we post two guards at a time and switch places, everyone might be able to get part of a good night's sleep. I can help carry the kits up there."

Crescentpaw glanced at the two '*kits*,' but said nothing.

"I think your medicine cat is right. If we're planning to travel across Windclan tomorrow then we should certainly get a sound rest."

Although Sootface initially disagreed, the cats found majority vote in favor of Jadestar's idea.

Crescentpaw felt like she was publicly embrassing herself when they all climbed the tumbledown rocks, but luckily the younger cats were having a rough time as well. Trufflefur slipped alongside her several times, while Rainpaw lost her footing and hissed before pulling herself back up.

"You know, I can hardly grasp why Riverclan sent an apprentice around the lake all by herself. Why didn't they send a warrior with you?" Trufflefur asked her once they all were comfortably situatuated out on the Highledge. His squirrel rested in a bushy

heap beside him.

The tabby-and-white she-cat sat up straight before answering his question.

"I'm actually of warrior age; I just don't have a mentor to manage my final assessment yet. And- we haven't got a leader either..." she trailed off.

"Oh, sorry. I won't call you an apprentice again." Trufflefur surprised her by declaring.

"Thank you," the Riverclan she-cat meowed appreciatively. Pepperpelt had gone inside the empty leader's den with her kits, and she was now complaining about the falling-apart nests inside.

After the queen's cursing subsided Crescentpaw sighed. *It looks like I won't have a nest to sleep in tonight. Not that there isn't worse things..*

Up on the Thunderclan Highledge, Crescentpaw looked into the night sky above her. She was searching for a glimpse of Silverpelt shimmering into view.

I might as well tell them.

"Riverclan didn't send me. I... kind of sent myself."

"Well, I won't condone you for such an ill-thought out idea. I'll let your clanmates do it when you return to camp." Jadestar compelled, looking over her shoulder. Her long back was swathed in shadows from the cliff's jutting overhang of craggy stone.

"You're lucky you survived this long." Sootface's meow was deep-throated from his perch out on the edge. Moon-rays threw light onto his ashen grey pelt, turning it silver in places. "A stray wolf out on the territories could've attacked you at dawn."

Like I don't know that!

"Speaking of, let me check that wound on your foreleg, Sootface." The tomcat looked back at Hillflower with baleful amber eyes.

"Oh come on now. It's not the end of the world." She rose to her paws and padded over, then began fussing with his foreleg.

"It needs a new poultice of horsetail and alder bark. Alder bark would help the swelling from over-exertion, horsetail to further prevent infection... Oh my, all of the marigold poultice has been wiped off...!" the pale tabby she-cat's voice was a resounding murmur as she carried on working.

"Trufflefur, have you got any injuries?" The medicine cat soon meowed.

"Well, come to think of it... there's a huge tooth gash behind my left ear. It stings real bad when I try to clean it." The tomcats lapis-colored eyes reflected the moon above them.

"I see," the medicine cat nodded enthusiastically. "Any other injuries?" She grabbed his face with two forepaws, gently tilting the tom's head so she could examine it. After Trufflefur shook his head, Hillflower narrowed her eyes and peered closer at his wound.

"Just that one. It was an unlucky blow. I was leaping up a tree with a thrush in my jaws and I tripped over its wing. The wolf caught me on the back of the head before I could leap up again."

Sootface snickered. "Should've left the bird rather than risking your life."

The hazel-brown tom tossed him a look, eyes narrowed but uncertain. He didn't say anything to defend himself.

"Well, it's deep but not fatal." The she-cat clarified. "As long as it doesn't get infected then you should be fine. You got very lucky it wasn't deeper." Hillflower sat down behind him and began rummaging through her herb-bundle, poking her paws into the remaining supplies.

"Hah, yeah." Trufflefur sounded unconcerned. The tomcat then twisted around, searching Crescentpaw's gaze.

"Seeing the other clans has reminded me of the one that left me behind. Crescentpaw, do you really think there's hope left for *all* the

clans? Even the ones who have..." his face crumpled. The tomcat seemed to be searching for a certain word until he gave up and his expression fell even further.

"Given up?" Rainpaw affirmed for him.

"You should be in the den. Go and get some sleep for tomorrow," Jadestar scolded her daughter, leering at the she-cat until Rainpaw rose and retreated.

"Uh- well, yeah." Crescentpaw let more confidence creep into her voice as she went on.

"Sure there is. Even for Shadowclan and Thunderclan. Starclan will find a way to restore what remains, I'm sure of it." A beetle crawled up to her resting elbow, and Crescentpaw nudged it away. "They'll send us to bring back Thunderclan eventually- and they'll find a new leader for Shadowclan."

Crescentpaw looked over at Trufflefur innocently. *I sure hope it doesn't sound like I'm making all of this up.*

Truthfully, I don't know what Starclan will do. Her closest guess was that they'd relocate the clans.

Trufflefur began to nod in agreement. He curled his tail up, legs splayed out in front of him. Crescentpaw's belly rested against the cool, heavy stone beneath them.

"It sounds like a plan to me. Let's just hope that it plays out that way." He sounded accepting rather than dismissive. The broad-shouldered tom shifted to a position where he was tensed to stand up.

"Are you hungry?"

"Uh- no..." was Crescentpaw's first instinct. *There's only one squirrel and there's kits in the den...*

The other cats looked suprised at Trufflefur's offer. Crescentpaw felt her fur heat up with embarrassment.

"Sure you are," the tom said, sounding incredulous. "You've traveled halfway across the territories in one day."

"How do we know she hasn't eaten on her way here? Or even right before she left Riverclan?" Sootface muttered ill-temperedly and then yawned.

Trufflefur rolled his eyes, facing the apprentice with respect in his gaze.

"Because she had to sneak away from her clan in order to come. And keep her eyes pricked for wolves along the way."

He rose to his paws picked up his squirrel, then padded over and dropped it in front of her.

"They hardly ever hunt during the day! Especially in Greenleaf with Twolegs about," Sootface argued, but every cat ignored him.

"Oh- thank you. But I don't need the whole thing. I'll offer Pepperpelt some for her kits first," Crescentpaw glanced back into the cave's black abyss.

Jadestar nodded, while Trufflefur quivered his whiskers. He sat down in front of her rather than retreating to his previous spot.

"I think you should eat your portion first. Kits forget that they're sharing half the time."

Crescentpaw blinked, then slowly nodded in agreement.

"We can take the first watch while you all rest," Trufflefur meowed over at Jadestar, Hillflower and Sootface.

The leader flicked her tail and retreated. Sootface grimaced over at them before he followed.

"Keep your ears pricked and your eyes wide. Look around the top edges of the hollow, that's where they'll be appearing first." The Skyclan deputy's meow was husky and commanding amid the tenebrous covering of night.

"We know how to stand guard, thanks." Trufflefur said contemptuously, his blue eyes piercing Sootface's amber ones. The two toms eventually broke gazes, and Sootface crossed the bare stretch of ground toward the den.

The smoky tom lashed his tail crossly, disappearing into the swathe of shadows without another word.

Thank you for reading!!! 🌓🤍

_____

Trufflefur

36

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The forest was brimming with interchanging songs of symphony. Huge tawny owls in the trees hooted back and forth to one another. Insects buzzed over the camp's edges, floating across the empty space between Thunderclan's hollow and then zig-zagging off into the forest beyond. Crickets scraped their teeth-like serrations against one other, producing a discreet chirruping sound.

A bullfrog croaked from somewhere deep in the forest. A bat shrieked in the night air, and then the wings of something swooping above the treetops blotted out some stars.

Even after sunfall, the territory beyond Thunderclan's camp was busy. There was abundant prey-scent on the wind. It smelled like it would've been a good night for hunting.

After Crescentpaw finished eating she dragged the squirrel into the den. All of the cats inside were curled up asleep, so she left the prey's half-eaten corpse laid close to Pepperpelt.

She then returned to Trufflefur and continued listening. The apprentice looked out several rabbit-chases, towards the cascade of darkness that was Thunderclan's stony floor.

Amongst all the habituated sounds of the forest, an eerie howl filled the cacophonous air. It sounded far-off but chilled her nonetheless.

I hope Darkflower decides to make her way to Riverclan with Plumetail. The tabby apprentice didn't want a Shadowclan elder dead for nothing, now that she had found a medicine cat.

But she had left the choice up to Darkflower, who had seemed protective of her last remaining clanmate. *Maybe she'll turn up on Riverclan land after we get back. Or even before, if she changes her mind faster.*

Trufflefur continued to sit across from her, not even his tail twitching. He stared at the camp entrance.

"If they come, they'll come from there." He echoed Sooftface's words.

Crescentpaw's eyes grew bloodshot from staring at the leaf-littered ramp for so long. She blinked then looked away, over at Trufflefur.

I don't think I can stay awake for much longer. I'm so exhausted... Her mind felt foggy. Crescentpaw's thoughts, too, were beginning to grow sluggish. And there was an anguished ache between her shoulders from walking all day.

She managed to stay awake for another hour, but when her eyes finally started closing Trufflefur spoke up.

"Alright, let's trade with Pepperpelt and Rainpaw."

Oh thank Starclan.

She felt a stab like stinging nettles as her paws struck down to get up and walk. As soon as the tabby-and-white apprentice got inside the den she flopped down with relief. Nest or no nest, she couldn't care less; and Crescentpaw immediately fell asleep.

When the she-cat awoke she found her eyes bleary and hard to open. They were sticky with prolonged sleep.

"-keeps telling me that he's sorry about what happened. Can you believe that?!" Crescentpaw heard Jadestar's voice as she gradually woke up.

She rolled to her paws, stretching out stiff legs and turning her head towards the sunlit den-entrance.

It's so bright outside! What time is it? Sootface, Rainpaw, Trufflefur and the kits were still asleep on the den floor across from her.

"No. How dare he!" a she-cat said. The voice belonged to Hillflower.

Crescentpaw licked her chest-fur a couple of times and then leaped to her paws and bounded out of the den.

"Why is it nearly sunhigh?" She noted the sun's position with an astonished glance.

I shouldn't have slept that long! "We've got to get going!" Her meow was distressed.

"Well, because none of us have had a proper rest in so long. And since you all took turns guarding the ledge last night, I figured I'd let a few of you sleep in after dawn."

Her tail quivered. Crescentpaw bit her tongue, trying to remain calm.

"We have to get going *now*," she repeated. "I told a clanmate that I'd be back within two sunrises."

"You only have Windclan left to cross," Jadestar looked unhurried. She bent to lick down a tufty spot of hair on her patchy tail.

"That doesn't matter." Crescentpaw let the hint of a growl creep into her voice. "We could easily come across wolves on the way, especially if we're stuck on Windclan land by nightfall." Her black-and-grey fur began bristling.

"And do you want to hunt along the way, or what?" Crescentpaw searched the ground for any sign of prey-bones, but there was none. *Have they eaten this morning or haven't they?* She couldn't tell.

Jadestar's gaze was begrudging. She had one eyebrow raised, as if she were beneath being scolded by an apprentice.

"I'm sure Rainpaw is hungry after standing guard last night," she tried to relay to the leaders softer side.

"*What*? My daughter stood guard last night?" Suddenly Jadestar's eyes were glinting with rage. She leaned forward and hissed. "Who arranged that?!"

Oops.

"Uh, Trufflefur. He said that Pepperpelt and Rainpaw would relieve us of our guard last night." Crescentpaw lifted a paw, defensive and taken aback.

What's her deal? Rainpaw should be a warrior by now.

"Rainpaw was asleep by the time I was roused for my watch!" Jadestar snapped. "Or faking it, anyway."

Hillflower rose to her paws and stooped towards the leader's den. The medicine cat's light-tabby haunches were swallowed up in shadow as she disappeared into the opening, rousing the cats inside.

"I told her that you would be hissed off," Pepperpelt walked out with a cool gaze and loose shoulders. Trufflefur followed behind her, then Sootface and Rainpaw.

"You should've told me when *you* woke me for the watch last night!" Jadestar scolded, snarling. The queen flattened her ears.

Jadestar then turned to Rainpaw and lectured her daughter in front of all the waiting cats. She shared a few condemning statements with Trufflefur as well.

"My daughter is only an apprentice.
Don't ever put her on sentry unless I'm made aware!" She hissed.

Crescentpaw flattened her ears, dismayed and confused at the same time.

She's over-reacting, but I haven't got the time to disagree with her.
Instead, she went into the den to rouse Pepperpelt's kits for travel.

It took awhile for them to wake up. Their pelts were spiky and their eyes bleary with sleep. Somehow they'd managed to sleep well atop the dustly old nest.

When they emerged, Crescentpaw was relieved to see each of the cats usher toward the cliff edge. They wasted no more time stretching, grooming or chatting.

"Kits down first," Hillflower advised cheerfully. She scooped up Cloverkit.

The black-and-white she-cat's rump was nearly brushing rock.

She's too big to scruff!

Hillflower tucked the apprenticed-aged cat into her chin, then lowered herself tail-first down the sloping cliff face. She dropped onto a flat stone outcrop. Cloverkit squealed as she was dangled over the cliff edge. Hillflower nearly lost her balance with the kit's uneven weight.

"Let me down! I'm old enough to do it on my own. You'll get us both hurt!"

The brown-tabby medicine cat ignored her. Hillflower focused her eyes on the next footpath below; the edge of a fallen tree that had most likely gotten there from a previous mudslide. She gripped Cloverkit tighter before bunching her muscles and leaping down; then did the same for the next ledge and so on.

Oatkit stepped forward next, but he was practically as large as his mother. He gave a placid glance towards Sootface when the Skyclan tom stepped forward.

"I'm *not* getting carried."

Crescentpaw watched him go as the cats behind her all passed around her flank to follow. When she realized she was the last cat, she leaned down with her eyes narrowed.

I can do this. Even without claws...

It was harder going down than it was going up. Last night, the frantic claw up the path had seemed habitual. Most of the cats had stepped with anxiety and unfamiliarity, save for Trufflefur.

"Skyclan cats don't climb stone. We hunt in the trees." Pepperpelt had defended herself with an angsty growl. Crescentpaw recalled the queen slipping off the footpath and into Sootface's shoulder. So really it hadn't felt so odd when she'd struggled to grip and slid

partway down the cliff herself.

Now, though- she was in broad, searing daylight with the other cats waiting for her below.

It was somewhat helpful to have her back claws. After losing her balance and nearly slithering forward, Crescentpaw found strength in using her back claws to predominately grip sturdy areas of stone.

When she reached the vertical tree she slid down it backward, bounded across the last two jutting stone ledges and then landed on the ground with a heavy thud.

It took her a few seconds to get her breath back. *Ugh. That faulty landing winded me.*

"Riverclan cats aren't very agile," Sootface commented with a curdling laugh. He was looking at Jadestar, but the she-cat was waiting beside Thunderclan's thorn tunnel.

"Let's go," Crescentpaw meowed firmly. She picked up speed and raced past Jadestar. Surprisingly, Oatkit and Cloverkit were the first two on her heels.

She was forced to slow down when Thunderclan's overgrown forestry tripped up her paws. The apprentice took a path that veered off to the right, slating upward towards an area with less undergrowth. The other cats swiftly followed, catching up within seconds.

When the Skyclan cats both saw and scented prey, Crescentpaw was compelled to agree that they should stop. Trufflefur was alright with them hunting on Thunderclan's land.

"Stay close. Like really close, where we can hear one another if we yowl." Jadestar commanded. "It's not open enough to see each other."

None of the others offered to hunt with her. *Good.* Crescentpaw sauntered off on her own to try and find something.

A mouse is my best bet.

However, it was a squirrel that she came across. Crescentpaw lost the creature after trying to find a good spot for ambushing downwind, then tripping over a moss-covered tree root. *Mouse-dung! That root is almost the same color as the forest floor!*

She kept trying. The Riverclan apprentice leaped up a rocky outcrop toward a copse of birch trees. There she came across a swallow. It was hopping along a low rotting tree branch.

The bird paid Crescentpaw no interest, chirping an off-tune melody into the cozy mid-day air. *As if it knows I can't reach it...*

She decided to test her luck. The she-cat bunched her muscles and leaped for the bird, but she missed the branch by a mouse-length. The swallow flapped its wings and fluttered to a different tree entirely. It twittered beseechingly there.

On the way back Crescentpaw caught vole-scent teeming amongst some pungent vegetation. The ground here was particularly soft and moist, bordered by one of Thunderclan's shallow fox-length streams.

She spotted the vole between some thick-growing poppy flowers. The plant's leaves were still wet with dew, and the vole bent its head up to suckle at its droplets.

Her footfalls were silent until she was well beyond pouncing distance. Crescentpaw waggled her haunches and then leaped, but her paws hit the vole's back and it slipped from beneath them. Before she could snatch the vole in her teeth it had gone.

She bit back a yowl of anger and shook out her ruffled pelt.

I can't manage to catch anything this time. Thunderclan land is too strange, and my missing claws aren't helping.

I must learn to adjust my hunting style.

With no more time left, she walked back towards their stopping place with her tail-tip brushing the earth.

As she had figured, the rest of the cats were already back. Besides Hillflower, Pepperpelt and the kits each one of them had prey;

which only made her feel more embarrassed.

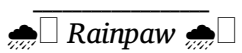
"I'll share with you," Rainpaw offered in the quietest voice possible. Crescentpaw had to prick her ears to catch it.

"Thanks," she meowed appreciatively, but it truly didn't make her feel any better. She ate with hunched shoulders, avoiding the other cat's eyes. Hoping they didn't suspect her incapabilities.

The clouds were white and sleek. But a hefty wind had picked up, and now they moved across the horizon with visible speed. The cats below padded through the rest of Thunderclan territory as fast as they could.

The way to Windclan's camp was long and tedious. To start; the wind kept switching directions, pressing against their flanks so hard that Cloverkit was nearly thrusted off a bluff.

Crescentpaw felt that a storm was brewing, but she couldn't tell how far off it was.



Jadestar, who she inherited her blue-gray coloring from ↴

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[image][image]

Sootface

"Just keep going! Almost there!"

"Why?" Sootface complained, raising his voice above the whipping wind. "There's no point! The Windclan scent-markers were barren. None of us could detect a trace of them along the border-stream."

"It doesn't matter," Crescentpaw said. "Thunderclan's scent marks were undetectable as well. There might be a cat left in their camp, like Trufflefur!"

Hillflower was nodding and looking over at her. Crescentpaw just pushed harder, willing her legs to slice through the wind easier than they would water.

But it was plowing into her face, making her eyes water and her ears bend backwards. All of the cats walked with their legs braced, and Crescentpaw felt they were making agonizing progress.

Mouse-dung to this. "I'm going to run the rest of the way!" The apprentice yowled, forcing her legs into a run. Her tail streamed out behind her, and she was pulled by the wind. She felt some sense of relief. Crescentpaw was now part of the swirling breeze rather than against it.

How's that for Riverclan not being agile, Sootface? She'd left him behind.

Her paws were barely touching the ground. Air bent her whiskers flat against her face. A resounding whistle was howling over the moorland.

Trufflefur and Rainpaw picked up speed far behind her, while the

kits did the same. Crescentpaw left them on fleeting paws, cresting a rise and finally catching a glimpse of the moorland camp.

She saw a ring of gorse bush engrossed with large stones at the foothills of a circular rise. In a fold between two hills was the gap for an entrance.

The line of gorse stretched across one foothill and over to the edge of another. Crescentpaw thought it was neat how Winclan's camp was lopsided. And it was nestled in the middle of a valley.

Even though it looks easily floodable, it's well-protected from the moorland winds. She skidded to a halt.

"Cool camp!" Oatkit trilled as he slowed to a walk behind her. Crescentpaw padded toward the camp opening more slowly, inhaling cautiously for any sign of Windclan warriors.

She didn't like what she smelled. Crowfood filled her scent-glands.

Something long-dead was in there, and she hadn't been able to see it from afar.

Swiveling her head around, Crescentpaw tried to keep her voice level as she spoke to the others.

"Hillflower, come with me. The rest of the cats should stay back here until we find the source of that scent."

"Uh-okay." Cloverkit scrunched up her nose. Her brother stood on tall, lanky-apprentice legs, then sat obeditently and nodded.

"Okay, but hurry." He looked curious as he rushed them.

"You should be the one to go," Sootface leaned over and whispered into Jadestar's ear. "Not some fish-eating oversized know-it-all apprentice."

She let her jaw drop open with astonishment, offended. Crescentpaw flattened her ears and narrowed her eyes, but really she was looking for Jadestar's reaction.

"Let Crescentpaw go if she wants to," Jadestar said calmly.

Her passive gaze flitted over the Riverclan apprentice. "Maybe it'll teach her a lesson about blind bravery."

Crescentpaw huffed and fought to keep her fur flat. *Blind bravery? I should snatch her those words right out of her mouth!*

"That's not fair," Oatkit meowed defensively. "She's done more to unite what's left of the clans than you have." He looked up at his leader with a puzzled expression.

Jadestar ignored him, but her hackles fluffed up and her eyes stretched. Sootface gave the young tom a repugnant scowl. He lifted a paw as if he wanted to cuff the kit, but didn't.

Crescentpaw turned around and left the other cats. Despite her silent leave, inside she was furious.

Talking about me all the time isn't helping anything! Are these cats mad?

I'm not doing this to try and be some hero. She rounded the first line of gorse bush, brushing lightly against it as she climbed the lowest crest of Windclan's expansive camp hills. There were den entrances dug out between and under the lines of gorse; as well as hollows between chunks and cracks of stone.

Hillflower trailed behind her, paws silent and ears pricked. The she-cat stayed quiet and watchful, most likely nervous about what might lie ahead.

"Hopefully just a dead wolf," Crescentpaw said after awhile. "Maybe Windclan killed one," she said in an attempt to comfort both Hillflower and herself.

Have clan cats ever killed a wolf? None in Riverclan while I've been alive... The dark tabby-she-cat wondered.

"But then where are they? It's seems like... " Hillflower trailed off, looking around while Crescentpaw had her ears pricked.

"I know. If they were still here, they'd have disposed of it."

Crescentpaw's words were bleak as she padded along, slinking beside the empty and scentless dens.

"My hope is that we don't find any Windclan bodies. Just a wolf's.

Or perhaps their old rotted fresh-kill pile, if it's all the way up there where their one maple tree is."

You're kidding yourself, Crescentpaw. She knew she was.

That smell didn't come off as an old prey pile. Instead it flowed down the slope in a pungent festering wind, filling Windclan's entire camp with a corrosive odor.

"It's an odd smell, isn't it? Like spoiled crow-food but... stronger."

Crescentpaw nodded, the fur on her shoulders beginning to rise with nerves.

"Let's hurry and find it."

They crossed the last rise, up to a hillock peak full of waving switchgrass. The maple tree stood tall and lonely, a few of its branches clattering together in the wind.

Stale wolf-scent was whispy but traceable. A few tufts of thick grey hairs were flattened into the trampled grass.

By the time she emerged from under the maple's trees cool covering she saw it. Sprawled figures barely visible above the turf, if not for their ear-tips.

Dead cats. Crescentpaw's stomach turned.

The tabby-and-white apprentice felt her mind fog with the roiling scent. It filled her nose and her mouth, making her eyes sting.

Somehow the scent was touching her brain. She wanted to throw up.

With a clenched knot in her belly, Crescentpaw edged close enough to glimpse the color of the cat's pelts; sandy yellow and tortishelle.

She avoided looking into their eyes- which they didn't actually have.

Instead the sockets were caved in and full of maggots. Writhing white pits with sinewy gaping jaws resting on the earth beneath them.

I shouldn't have looked that long!

She could hardly tell which one was a she-cat versus a tom. Their overlain Windclan scent was gone. Their features were destroyed, with flies landing on their bloody, rotting lips.

Crescentpaw deliberately tore her gaze away and padded around. She was relieved to find no other dead cats.

"Their injures are entensive," Hillflower commented in a high vibrato tone, her voice critical.

"I can see the wounds that killed this one." She crouched beside one of the fallen cats, peering close but unwilling to touch them. "Their pelts look familiar. I think I know who they are."

The medicine cat couldn't pull her eyes away from their crumpled, deteriorating bodies. Her neck-fur was standing on edge.

"One has a removed jaw. The other one's shoulder has been torn apart and eaten... but they've been here for awhile, rotting in the sun. Scavengers are still eating them."

Yeah, half of that cat's body is gone. She was too shocked to say it out loud, but now recognized that one of the cats had no torso and back legs. It was deceivingly covered with tall prairie grass.

A crow cawed as it circled high above them. "We ought to get out of here," Hillflower meowed. Crescentpaw turned her head.

"Sunset will fall before we make it back to Riverclan. And a storm is coming!"

"That gives us more of a reason to go now!" Hillflower chided. The medicine cat was standing on her paws with her ears flattened to

keep out the wind. Her gaze, too, had worry in it.

"What about burying them?" The medicine cat looked skeptical. "Or a vigil?"

Finally the she-cat all but hissed, "We have to worry about the cats that are left alive, Crescentpaw. That's very honorable but as you like to say; We have to go."

Crescentpaw thought for a moment, then came to the conclusion that she was right. *If we get trapped on Windclan land during the storm, we might not make it back before sunrise tomorrow*.

Especially if we run into some wolves.

"Alright. Let's go back and tell the other cats."

When Crescentpaw and the Skyclan medicine cat made it back to Jadestar and the others, they didn't look optimistic. Crescentpaw didn't blame them. The scent of rotting flesh flowed down the slope with the interchanging breeze. She could still catch wind of it even from here.

Jadestar wanted to see it for herself. It was decided that Pepperpelt and the Skyclan leader would accompany the original two cats back. Crescentpaw led them at a slow pace, crestfallen for what she was about to show them.

Pepperpelt gasped, while Jadestar set her face in a disgusted lour, shaking her head.

"That's Sunrunner. I'd recognize her yellow pelt anywhere. She was a patient senior warrior, always listening to the elders at Gatherings."

"And that's Stalkpaw, I think." Pepperpelt meowed. "I knew his mother before she died. I didn't expect he-..." the speckled gray she-cat lashed her tail in distress.

"So there's no Windclan warriors here. None left." Jadestar declared, her stormy grey-and-tan pelt rippling under the looming clouds above.

"Are they all dead, or have the others fled somewhere?" Crescentpaw pondered aloud, but no cat answered her.

Pepperpelt

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[image]

Crescentpaw swished her tail in an arch behind her, then began pacing in the trembling ryegrass.

"Are we burying them or not? Because if we aren't then... it would be best to go." She glanced at Hillflower, and the she-cat meowed in agreement.

Pepperpelt grunted and looked down at the Windclan cats, as if she hadn't thought of that.

"Why would we? They're so disgusting and crawling with maggots, they'd fall apart if we touched them!"

Crescentpaw lashed her tail. *That wouldn't have been my choice of words, but okay.*

"We shouldn't waste energy by burying their mangled carcasses. It would take at least a hunting trip's worth of time just to wrap their bodies and dig each grave," Pepperpelt meowed dismally.

Thick, tussocky grass whipped and whirled in the wind behind them. The branches of the mighty maple tree clattered together.

This wind was particularly strong.

Could Starclan have sent the storm?

Will it help protect us against the wolves or will it just make our travels slower?

The massing grey clouds were knotted together in billowing layers of fleece. They looked laden with rain.

"Let's just go," Jadestar said, finalizing the decision. "Somehow it feels wrong to disturb their bodies now, after they've become so

decayed." The Skyclan leader sighed while Pepperpelt nodded.

"If we leave them here as carrion for the wolves, they might not follow our scent-trail back to Riverclan."

Silence fell, and whipping wind whistled into the cat's ears. Jadestar looked at the smaller grey she-cat beseechingly, but Pepperpelt didn't add anything else.

"That's disrespectful to these Windclan warriors," Trufflefur spoke up just as Crescentpaw turned toward their descent. The queen in turn opened her jaws to start arguing.

"One of them wasn't even a warrior," Pepperpelt patronized.

She felt her nerves thinning. Trufferfur was right, but couldn't he have argued later?

If I don't leave this awful rot-place soon then I'm going to freak!

"Shut up!" The fluffy apprentice snapped, lowering her head and lashing her tail.

"Stalkpaw died as a warrior if he died protecting his clan. You dare speak on the right that Starclan would give him? Of the title that they would give him?" Crescentpaw corrected herself. With her lip curled, her eyes bore into Pepperpelt's.

Pepperpelt had the gall to look ashamed. Jadestar's brazen look fell upon her.

"Crescentpaw's right. Even though we won't hold vigil for these cats or bury them, they deserve the respect of not being talked about in such a manner."

Pepperpelt shrugged with an ignoble pout. Flicking her tail, she passed the three other cats and set off downslope.

I'm sorry, Sunrunner and Stalkpaw. It felt wrong to just leave them there. Without any Starclan vigil, without any burial, without any hope left for them.

A storm is brewing, and only speed will get us home safely. Jadestar and Hillflower say we should go now. Which, Crescentpaw had to begrudgingly admit they were right.

The black tabby-and-white apprentice stepped forward with confidence. She heard the other cats fall into step behind her while she padded out of Windclan's camp.

"We need to eat again before we reach Riverclan," Sootface meowed. He stomped along on huge paws with his black tail curled up behind him.

"Do we?" Hillflower meowed thoughtfully. "We had a bit of prey earlier, and if we keep going it's almost certain that we'll reach Riverclan before nightfall."

"I agree," Crescentpaw meowed fruitfully.

"It's quite a ways off. We need to keep up our strength." Sootface lifted his head higher, tufted ears curling back with the wind. "We'll have a lot to explain when we reach Riverclan, and it'll be too late to send out hunting patrols."

Not more arguing..! She could see Sootface beginning to puff up.

"I'm sure my clan will have something left on the fresh-kill pile when we arrive. It is greenleaf, after all." Crescentpaw soothed.

Sootface looked at her, his mouth twisted into a stubborn grimace.

"Isn't that breaking the warrior code?" Trufflefur mused, sitting down and licking a forepaw. He drew it over an ear with his eyes half-closed.

"As if that matters when Windclan no longer exists," Sootface spat. His dark ears were outlined by the pallad grey-blue sky.

"That, or the survivors have fled to a different territory. Perhaps they're even all kittypets." The deputy kept quarreling.

Isn't he supposed to be an experienced warrior?

"Fine," Jadestar growled. "Twenty minutes to hunt- and no more. If you get lucky and find something, you share it with the other cats. If you do not then we move along. Better get going."

The cats split off from one another, so Jadestar opened her jaws to yowl at them. "Hey! Pepperpelt deserves to hunt sometimes too. Somebody watch her kits. And STAY IN PAIRS," She warned.

"NO! You two aren't hunting together. Trufflefur can Sootface can hunt, and you can hunt with me," Jadestar said to her daughter when Rainpaw paired with the Thunderclan tom.

What's that about?

Crescentpaw didn't have time to wonder. She knew she couldn't hunt with one of these other cats, less she might reveal her secret.

"I'll watch your kits!" The Riverclan she-cat meowed hurriedly, skittering over to Pepperpelt before Hillflower could reach her.

"Thanks," Pepperpelt slow-blinked at her and then sauntered off to hunt. The queen disappeared into a rise swelled with tall grass. Swathes of periwinkle heather grew at the bottom of its ridge.

While Hillflower followed behind her, Crescentpaw glanced at the sun. It was indeed dipping toward the far edge of the horizon, with one end of the sky garnishing into a cavernous lapis hue.

Ugh. This is a waste of time when we could've kept going. She turned toward the inquisitive eyes of Cloverkit and Oatkit.

The Riverclan apprentice had no problem watching two of-aged apprentices. She kept them entertained with an old classic; warrior training. She touched up on their hunting crouches, watched them stalk and then demonstrate down-swipe forepaw slashes. Luckily the two kits were so focused on themselves that they didn't ask Crescentpaw to demonstrate.

As they shredded leaves, the apprentice felt herself becoming more enthralled in the training. She almost forgot her surroundings.

Crescentpaw noticed that Cloverkit in particular was struggling. She didn't have much efficiency, and the leaf merely flicked to the side rather than tearing with a deep gash like Oatkit's did.

"Look." She leaned over a small oval-shaped leaf. With an outstretched paw, Crescentpaw patiently showed Cloverkit the gesture; without shredding her intended leaf for her.

Which of course, she couldn't have done anyways. Even if she had tried. Crescentpaw's ears gestured toward the leaf and then she backed up.

"Make sure the power of your swipe is coming from your back and shoulders, not your forelimb or paw."

As Cloverkit demonstrated the simple move easily this time, she watched with warm approval.

"I'm suprised you guys haven't learned such early-training things like this."

"We've wanted to learn this stuff forever. But we can't even become apprentices!" Cloverkit crowed. She sounded upset.

Oatkit was nodding as well now. "They won't let us." He gazed up at Crescentpaw with indignation in his eyes.

"Rainpaw can't either, and she's been waiting longer than us. Which is like... *forever*."

Crescentpaw wasn't surprised. Rainpaw already looked like a fully-grown warrior. She was almost the same height as her mother. Even when she sat down, she was a tall and muscular she-cat.

"Nobody lets us do anything! We're always controlled. We have to stay as kits forever and Rainpaw has to stay as-..." the kit died off as the sound of pounding paw-steps reached their eardrums. All of the cats turned their heads to see Hillflower bolting towards them.

The flame-orange sun was mostly hidden behind a knot of stormy grey clouds. Its light had nearly passed behind the hills, so long shadows stretched from each of the cat's bodies.

Hillflower's black mimic followed behind her, as she rapidly crossed the space between her and them. The she-cat's jaws were parted while she panted for breath. *How long has she been running?*

The medicine cat drew up with her chest heaving. Her paws faltered as she overstepped them in her haste to stop so quickly.

She tumbled past them, then righted herself. Hillflower's eyes were huge pools of fear. The tabby she-cat was gulping air, her brown tabby fur bristling all over. She had no prey in her jaws, and Crescentpaw now knew why. She could smell why.

"A-wolf- there's a wolf!" Hillflower cried, zigzagging around Crescentpaw and the kits after spitting the words out. Her back arched and stretched beneath her rapidly moving paws.

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[image]

Crescentpaw turned her head just in time to see the creature pursuing. It took the exact path that Hillflower had taken, as if it were following her scent.

The animal had a dark, distinctive predatory aura. As if it had no goal other than to kill them.

Which it does. The wolf's head was lowered as it sniffed along Hillflower's footfalls. It was trotting quickly, large paws skimming the grass. It looked like a young wolf.

Crescentpaw's ears flattened. She barreled her head into Oatkit's flank, shoving the tomkit into a barreling run.

"Get back to Windclan's camp! Back to the maple tree!" She snapped.

Cloverkit stumbled over her own paws.

"That's too far!" The kitten wailed pitifully, hardly looking where she was stepping.

Oatkit darted ahead of them. Crescentpaw tensed.

"There's no trees out here, Cloverkit! We have to go now."

They had waited too long. The wolf overcame them, and Crescentpaw flattened herself to the ground beside Cloverkit, trying to cover the kitten's nape with her outstretched paws.

The wolf didn't even glance at them. Its feet flung up dirt as it passed them by. The animal rounded the bend of a hill and within seconds was gone.

It's following Hillflower's trail so closely that it didn't notice us. Cloverkit trembled in the grass.

"Go now. Get to the maple tree *now*!" She pulled the kit up by her scruff. Cloverkit's white tail was fluffed with terror.

"By myself?" She asked, glancing around.

Crescentpaw's blood was roaring in her ears. She swiveled her head, a sense of foreboding swelling in her chest.

The apprentice twitched her tail, not sure what to do next, yet knowing she had no time to think about it.

"Yes, just go! Follow Oatkit's scent trail to the Windclan camp." She meowed firmly a few seconds later.

"I've got to see if Hillflower's okay. Go, hurry! You'll be fine."

Crescentpaw made sure that Cloverkit headed in the right direction, and quickly. Then she leaped off the path toward the wolf's scent trail. Windclan grasses blurred around her, golden-gray in the wash of shadow beneath a dim-lit sky. Twilight would fall soon.

The apprentice was perturbed. *I thought we'd be lucky enough to make it back to Riverclan before a wolf showed up. I thought we'd have more warriors to deal with something like this, if it* did *happen.*

She trudged on with oatgrass lashing against her muzzle. *Hillflower can't be killed. She can't be. She's got to be okay.* Crescentpaw pushed through the stems, her adrenaline growing.

Her turmoilious thoughts were cut off as she skidded into a sloping dip with gritty earth. Dark spiky plants grew from the loosened soil, strong-smelling and stiff.

Crescentpaw hurled around them and drew up short, paws faltering as she nearly slipped in blood.

Hillflower's fluffy neck-fur was a mess of torn flesh, exposing the pale pink-and-white windpipe inside. The she-cat's eyes were blank and reflectionless.

She stared up at the soft peony clouds, but Crescentpaw knew that she wasn't seeing anything while she laid there on her back.

Starclan help us...

The only other injury was a tapering trickle of blood from bite wounds in her back. The wolf had killed Hillflower and left her here.

To come back later. Very soon later. They didn't even bury her. Her pupils shrank into slits, and Crescentpaw felt her heart swell with terror.

The others.

She left Hillflower and hurled herself through the heather, away from the spiky plants and the medicine cat's stiffening body.

Am I crazy or have these wolves learnt some sort of strategy for hunting us? Slay as many as you can first, then come back later to eat the victims.

Just how intelligent are they? Her tail bushed as she ran. A clear scent-trail was laid out before her.

It's heading in the direction Cloverkit went. A sickening feeling rose within her. It plagued her thoughts and set her nerves on end. Inquietude caused her paws to jerk.

She followed the musky canine scent straight to the source. Crescentpaw saw a pair of fluffy grey haunches in the gloom ahead of her. The Riverclan she-cat ran harder as she drew closer, fur streaming in the wind.

The wolf's back arched as it flinched and then lunged toward something. She pulled up behind the thick-furred animal, snarling.

Has it got Cloverkit? Crescentpaw glimpsed two other cats from the corner of her eye.

Trufflefur and Sootface were beside the wolf's front paws, aiming slashes at its muzzle and face. The thick-furred animal snapped at

their ears and forelegs.

She saw Trufflefur flinch back and hiss when a tooth caught his shoulder. He attacked all the more savagely in defense. Right when Crescentpaw bared her teeth to join in, the wolf lifted its head above their assaulting claws.

It focused on the retreating Cloverkit. She looked injured, dragging a bloodied hind-leg behind her. One part of her face was ripped apart and raw, streaming with a dark red liquid. Her flesh caught the light of the claw-scratched moon between cloud, exposed and glistening while the mangled kit pulled herself along. She looked like half-dead prey.

The wolf stepped over Sootface and Trufflefur, launching itself into a loping run. Panic exploded in Crescentpaw's heart.

She stamped her back paws and took off in a flying sprint. Her legs were a blur as she sailed above the higher Windclan grasses, paws barely touching ground.

"Help! Help!" Cloverkit was wailing now, to no cat in particular since she was faced toward Windclan's dark open moorland.

She's too exposed! "I'm coming, Cloverkit! Just run!"

The Riverclan she-cat managed to reach the wolf before it reached Cloverkit. She leaped onto its shoulders, planning to fasten her foreclaws into the thick fur of its ruff and bite at its eyes.

It was an impulsive idea. She slid off immediately.

Crescentpaw didn't give up her attack. She showed the wolf a relentless spitting assault, lashing her forepaws against its muzzle and drawing her lips back in a snarl. With her ears flattened, she leaped onto its nose with her teeth bared.

Her fangs sunk into the leathery flesh with a grating spurt of blood, and Crescentpaw felt fierce satisfaction aiding the ferocity of her attack.

However, the wolf merely lifted a foreleg. It scraped a strong set of

blunt claws against her ribs, causing her to let go immediately. The animal snapped strong jaws at her forehead, just barely missing her skull and smashing it to oblivion.

Her flank was smarting when Crescentpaw reached the earth. She landed on her feet and recovered quickly, glancing in dismay as the wolf rapidly left her behind.

Cloverkit was still dragging herself, but slower now. The wolf took a few more striding steps, bending its neck to reach for her.

Terror bushing her pelt, Crescentpaw surged forward again without hesitating. She was aware of the other warriors beside her. She thought she could hear Jadestar yowling orders behind them.

The Riverclan apprentice didn't know or care when Skyclan's leader arrived. Her gaze was fixed on that grey-brown pelt.

As she fell upon the wolf a second time, she ripped her teeth into its back tendon. The animal seemed not to react, its shoulder muscles rippling as it tore at Cloverkit's body.

Let Cloverkit go!

The animal was so much larger than her that she couldn't lift its hindleg, let alone imbalance it. When Crescentpaw released and bounded towards the wolf's forelegs, she halted.

Cloverkit's head was in the wolf's mouth. The kit's eyes were already clouded. Her neck was gripped firmly by the wolf's lower jaw, while the crest of her skull took the brunt of its sunken-in canines. Her brown-and-white body hung down limp.

Turmoil rotted in Crescentpaw's belly, until it felt like maggots were eating her alive.

I was too late. I failed.

"Stay back!" Jadestar was screaming at her.

Twice.

The Skyclan leader took a flying leap from her rapid running and knocked into the wolf's temple. It scrunched its eyes and flinched backward, taking the full force of Jadestar's hit.

Jadestar was on it again instantly. The wolf pinned its ears. Her claws ripped at its lips and eyelids, so that it was forced to drop Cloverkit. In attempt to regain line of sight, the wolf blinked and backed away.

Trufflefur and Sootface approached behind her. The two warriors aimed blows at the same area, copying the Skyclan leader's relentless attacks.

Within a few seconds they had disoriented the lone wolf. The animal flicked blood from its shredded maw. It took a few faltering pawsteps backward.

Underneath a darkening ashen sky, the wolf whined with confusion and gave up.

The remaining warriors watched it walk away. Darkness swallowed the moorland, as the stormy sky above tugged the clouds along with a hefty, humid wind.

Rainpaw approached from a shadowy area of well-grown horsetail. Clearly she had been hiding. She smelled of the plants she'd emerged from.

Glancing over at Cloverkit's bloody body with concern, Crescentpaw expected her to say something, and when she didn't Jadestar spoke up.

"We must bury Cloverkit, find the others and leave." Jadestar's tone was grave.

Crescentpaw looked at her chest-fur with dismay.

"Hillflower isn't... alive either. We have to bury her, too." The Riverclan cat's voice was strained. She felt her tail fall several inches lower, as she went on to explain what had happened while she was watching the kits.

"Why wasn't she with Pepperpelt? I *said* to keep in pairs!" Jadestar's emerald gaze was exasperated. She cursed and began pacing.

In the gloom of Windclan's sky-exposed moor, the cats just stared at one another.

"Whatever the reason, we can't just leave their fresh bodies lying around. More wolves could come soon." Rainpaw's eyes were wide with distress, and Crescentpaw could understand why.

The Riverclan apprentice opened her jaws to speak, clear and patient as she questioned the others. "Can't one of us go back to the spot we split off from? Pepperpelt might be waiting there with prey." *If she somehow missed the wolf scent.*

"And Oatkit's back at the Windclan camp by now." Crescentpaw urged.

"Hopefully."

I don't want Pepperpelt returning to a buried Cloverkit, then finding out her son is dead as well...

"We have to find her," Crescentpaw pursued. "Whether she's still alive or not."

"It's not safe. It could get another one of us killed," Jadestar shook her head, long whiskers swaying.

"And we can't leave Cloverkit here, either. That's asking for the wolf to come back."

Ugh. What if the wolf crosses Pepperpelt's path on her way back? But she accepted the clan leaders choice and began to dig alongside them. Crickets chirped in the waving grasses beyond, while Silverpelt twinkled above.

When they were done they went back for Hillflower, dragging her body right up next to Cloverkit's.

"They will be buried together. Side by side," Jadestar meowed at her clanmates while Crescentpaw and Trufflefur worked alongside

them.

Their paws were gritty and dirt-stained. The cool breeze provided relief to their labor, tousling Crescentpaw's plumey fur.

I hope Oatkit made it to that maple tree. Her breath became ragged as she shoved the last piles of earth into the hole, finishing up beside the other cats.

May you bound as a Starclan warrior in Silverpelt. She prayed for Hillflower and Cloverkit as the other cats bent their heads in silent prayer.

Crescentpaw's ears swiveled as she heard light pawsteps approaching from behind.

Pepperpelt's belly swayed as she increased speed, speaking around a large grouse in her jaws. The feathers on its neck were stuck out at awkward angles.

"Where are my kits?"

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[image]

Each cat avoided Pepperpelt's gaze, not prepared to have seen her so soon.

The Skyclan queen spat out her prey when she came within a fox-length of their paws. Her eyes were full of frightful alarm.

"It stinks of wolf. Did you chase it off? I saw it while we were hunting." Pepperpelt's gaze was incredulous, but once again no one answered.

"Did something happen to my kits?" She leaned over to one side, trying to peer around Trufflefur's shoulder.

"What's that behind you?"

The brown tom scooted closer, blocking her view of the freshly dug graves.

"WHERE ARE MY KITS?" Pepperpelt repeated with a roar when no one stepped forward to respond. Her claws slid out, glinting in the cloudy-blue night.

"IF THOSE ARE MY KITS GRAVES I'M GOING TO-"

"Calm down!" Sootface snapped at her, but Pepperpelt's speckled gray fur was bristling wildly. She turned around with her back arched.

"You're the one that was watching them, *Crescentpaw*." The queen spat the name with venom in her voice.

"So where are they?"

Crescentpaw dropped her head, ears flattening. Even she herself was unwilling to face this mother's wrath.

"We just buried Hillflower and Cloverkit. Oatkit is back at the Windclan camp." Jadestar swallowed.

"The wolf crossed paths with Crescentpaw and the kits while she was watching them. She tried to send the kits back to Windclan while she went to retrieve Hill-"

"Cloverkit is... dead? In that grave right there?" Pepperpelt flicked her head back towards the black tabby apprentice. Her gaze burnt a hole through the space between them.

"Yes... I-I don't judge you for blaming me," Crescentpaw said quickly, with wide reprehensible eyes. She was prepared for the queen to strike her.

"I'm sorry. I was distracted when the wolf came upon us. I tried to... I know it was my fault-"

Pepperpelt sank to the ground. Her shoulders shook as she crouched there and began sobbing her grief. The warrior's eyes were creased in distress, and when she opened them they were streaming.

This is worse than her clawing me. Crescentpaw's forepaws drew into her belly. She felt her throat tighten, having to choke back her own sob of guilt.

It's all my fault.

Pepperpelt suddenly turned her head and stared over at Crescentpaw.

"*You* should've been the one to die." She said, her eyes bloodshot. "You're the reckless apprentice who acts on every impulsive idea, not Cloverkit!" Her sides were heaving as she trembled and glared.

"You left my kits for a full-grown medicine cat!"

The she-cat's eyes were so full of emotion, Crescentpaw couldn't break her stare. She could only sit there and take it as Pepperpelt tore into her.

"You'd better hope Oatkit is still alive. All of this is your fault. If we

hadn't of left Skyclan territory, Cloverkit would be in her nest in the trees *right now!"* She snarled and screamed.

Crescentpaw couldn't deny a word of it. Guilt caused her to lower herself to the ground.

I didn't mean for this to happen!

"My precious kit! My perfect Cloverkit!" Pepperpelt shivered again, her head dipping as she let out a reverberating yowl. The Skyclan queen didn't look up from her huddle of grief this time.

"I'm so sorry, Pepperpelt!" Crescentpaw's ears were so flat against her head that it looked like she didn't have any.

Sorry doesn't mean anything. Her gut twisted into a writhing rats nest as she huddled into herself.

Sootface glanced at her, then murmured. "Do you realize now that you can't do everything, apprentice?" His gaze turned into a condemning one.

"It was an accident, though." Trufflefur cut in with an agitated mew. "Wasn't Hillflower's death as well?"

"Crescentpaw had *one* job. To watch the kits!" Sootface shot back, interrupting the Thunderclan tom.

The cats sat awhile longer, as Pepperpelt wept. The cloud layer above them was mackerel-grey. Clots of stormy cotton blew toward them, hinting at rain.

When the clan cats finally moved off, the wolf-scent was beginning to fade on the fleeting wind. Sootface carried Pepperpelt's grouse for her.

They found Oatkit clinging to the highest branch of Windclan's maple tree. He was so far up that it took awhile to coax him down.

When the tomkit finally dropped onto all four paws, his mother embraced him with a nuzzle over his shoulder.

Then Pepperpelt told him what had happened to Cloverkit, because that's the first thing Oatkit had asked.

He had even yowled "Where's Cloverkit?!" while clinging to a skinny tree branch. But no cat would tell him till he'd reached the ground.

Crescentpaw didn't want to listen. She turned her face away and tried to blot out to the young tom's dismay.

"But.. she was just here." His voice broke through her flattened ears anyway. "Right before I ran we were learning warrior moves together."

Oatkit seemed beyond disbelief, as if the thought of losing his sister had never occurred to him.

Jadestar and Hillflower kept them so safe. And I ended all that when I brought them out here on the moor.

She recalled the medicine cat's professionalism and patience, as well as little Cloverkit's independence and curiosity.

How is it they're gone? They were just here with us, alive and talking and breathing. I hate this feeling.

Again...

Crescentpaw's legs were dragging by the time they crossed the Riverclan border. Her thoughts were still badgering her. She remembered falling off the wolf twice, and both times not causing any damage that slowed it down.

Maybe it was a mistake doing this on my own. She didn't know what to think.

Trufflefur padded alongside her. He avoided a thin stream of water beside his pads. Crescentpaw crouched down to take a drink.

"So how did you and Hillflower become separated? She's the one that led the wolf onto Crescentpaw and your kits." Sootface mumbled around the large bird some time later.

"I ran with the prey when I saw the wolf," Pepperpelt snapped, her meow full of impudence.

"I owe it to my kits to stay alive."

Does that mean Hillflower could've lived, if she had dropped their prey?

No cat will ever know.

"Besides, I left Hillflower because I was worried about them. I went all over the place searching for my kits, and when I saw that they weren't there, and Crescentpaw wasn't either-." She stopped and swallowed, blinking as if fighting away tears.

"And I didn't know one of them was back there *getting killed!"*

The she-cat's eyes blazed while she curled her lip in a repugnant manner. No cat could meet her gaze, and none of them could say anything on behalf of themselves.

"I don't want to reach Riverclan without my daughter," Pepperpelt growled from the back of her throat.

Crescentpaw's ears burned. She knew that she was most at fault, since she had offered to watch the kits.

It was such an awful decision, knowing I don't have claws.

"Cloverkit would've made a fine warrior," Sootface agreed. Crescentpaw's gaze faltered momentary, as she stared into the dark shadows shrouded between and underneath Riverclan's foliage.

I was so useless in that attack. I didn't help anyone. She looked down at her dirt-stained legs. They padded methodically across the wet terrain.

I can scrape dirt out of a grave, but I can't properly hunt or fight. At least to some extent; all I'm good for is helping dig graves.

Like an elder.

"I can't do this. I don't want to do this. I don't want to lose my other kit to a wolf. Oh, Starclan. Cloverkit, I'm so sorry." Pepperpelt began sobbing again. "My kit is dead on Windclan territory. I can't even visit her grave. I-I can't.." her voice quivered.

"Hurry, everyone circle around Oatkit so he isn't vulnerable!" The queen fretted, and all of the other cats listened.

Jadestar didn't even scold her. The whipping wind was putting them all on edge. It reached down to the wetland floor, ruffling the fur along their backs.

Crescentpaw tried to meet Oatkit's gaze as he followed his frantic mother. The tomkit's yellow eyes were downcast.

Rumbles of thunder crossed the landscape with a resounding growl. She searched for Silverpelt, but could see no stars. The sharp slating air was causing her eyes to water.

The cats lowered their heads and pushed on. Eating the quail had been forgotten. When the clouds broke open and rain poured down, they loped into an exhausted run.

"There's shelter in my camp. Let's hurry."

Crescentpaw led them through familiar paths on Riverclan's territory. Her clanmate's scents clung to the wet fronds and grasses. They skirted a few dripping holly bushes and padded beside dark swathes of fern.

Shadows darkened her swirled tabby pelt. Crescentpaw's feet slapped into puddles and splashed water onto her legs. She glided over the wet earth, touching soaked foilage and sending more water droplets spattering across her flank.

"We're here," she said with relief when she saw the dark abyss that was her camp entrance. A cat's eyes flashed beside the opening, where they stood on sentry.

Racoonstripe was the cat on guard. His eyes narrowed in scrutiny.

"You sure do disappear a lot" the tomcat remarked, sounding riveted.

The apprentice's paws nearly dragged, and her flank was matted with twigs and sticker plants. Wet, chilled and tired-eyed, all of the cats bunched behind Crescentpaw while she paused at the entrance.

"I'll go and wake the camp." The Riverclan warrior turned with his striped tail beckoning.

"Come inside and eat your prey. We've got a few fish we can share."

"I'm not eating fish," Sootface complained. Crescentpaw made sure to thwack her wet tail in his face when she passed him. It was satisfying when he flinched with an enraged hiss.

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[image]

Crescentpaw waited in the pouring rain. Sootface and Rainpaw were sharing the grouse beside her.

Lightning lit up the ground and treetops above them, accompanied by the thunder that came soon after. She watched Racconstripe duck into the apprentices den, jumping with fright when a thunder-clap split.

Tinypaw and her friend Cheetah looked tired when they emerged, but their eyes lit up with delight upon seeing Crescentpaw.

"Boy, have we got some things to tell you," Tinypaw muttered under her breath. She glanced over with an impressed gaze at Crescentpaw's company.

Cheetah rubbed muzzles with her, and Tinypaw twined tails with her sister briefly.

"You did it, Crescentpaw. You brought some of them back!" Her spotted friend sounded enraptured, standing on the tips of her toes.

"I can't wait to meet the other clan cats." A smile was placed across Cheetah's spotted face. "They smell weird. I want some of them to be my friends. Like the little sad-looking yellow one that's around my age."

"That's Oatkit. He's grieving right now," Crescentpaw explained. Pangs of guilt seized her again. "It may be best to approach him later on."

Cheetah's eyes crinkled with understanding. "Okay. That's fine because I'm just so glad my best friend is back and yay you have to tell us all about it!"

"We're so glad you're okay." Tinypaw trilled, sitting down with her

tail flicking to and fro.

"And I you guys." Crescentpaw's eyes gleamed as she studied Tinypaw, and her sister looked right back at her. They couldn't say what they wanted to in front of all the other cats.

We need to talk about her training. Surely Houndspots suspects something of her claws if he hasn't found out already?

Rowanpaw stood stark in the gloom behind them, her yellow eyes strangely watchful. As per usual, the cinnamon-brown she-cat was alone. She hardly twitched an ear under the sheen of falling rain.

"Hey, Rowanpaw. I missed you!" Crescentpaw called, but her chestnut sister stayed quiet.

The warriors were walking up. They gathered between Crescentpaw and Jadestar predominately. Sootfur huffed as he was forced to the back of the crowd.

A gust of wind swirled through the cat's pelts. It was so vigorous that it turned some of their ears inside-out.

"Crescentpaw, let's start with what you've got to tell us. Then we'll move onto what I've got to tell *you*."

Crescentpaw gave a nervous grin, nodding acceptance at Lagoonstripe's no-nonsense words.

"Where's the Shadowclan and Windclan cats?" Quietdew probed, but her voice was nearly lost on the wind.

"Wait. First let's gather in the largest den we have available." Alpinefog declared. "The warriors den will have plenty of room for us, even with these other clan warriors." The rain cascaded down in a watery torrent, so that they could hardly see their own paws.

Jadestar opened her jaws to agree as a clap of thunder lashed the cat's nerves all over again. The warriors nodded in eager agreement.

Emberfawn glanced at the sky with a concerned expression. His soaked reddish-brown pelt was slicked against his frame.

"Grab some prey if you want." The tomcat's husky mew lifted above the wind as they rose to their paws.

Crescentpaw grabbed a pike off the fresh-kill pile. *I told them there would be prey*! They had stopped to hunt for nothing.

Cloverkit could still be here. And Hillflower.

Familiar clanmates passed her on their way through the den mouth. She caught the scent of their wounds.

One of them smells like infection.

When all of the cats had settled Crescentpaw felt relieved. The trees were almost doubling over outside.

She heard the wind blasting against the roof as she curled her paws beneath her. She immediately felt warm beside Tinypaw and Cheetah. Taking another bite of pike, Crescentpaw's belly expanded to accommodate the well-deserved prey.

"You got back just in time, it seems. Now start by explaining your thinking when you left before dawn the other day." Alpinefog swished his plumed tail across the den floor.

It took a long while for the apprentice to explain her antics. She finally got to the part about Windclan's camp, then their loss of Hillflower and Cloverkit.

Some of the Riverclan cats didn't look surprised, but Pepperpelt's expression was growing dark and contorted all over again.

"Starclan no. Not a kit!" Emberfawn tensed.

Jadestar nodded, while Crescentpaw looked at the grass and thought of Cloverkit's missing presence.

"And we still have no medicine cat. Back to the root of the problem!" Quietdew growled.

"Hillflower was skilled, but not old. She had plenty of time left to train an apprentice." Lagoonstripe exclaimed.

"May Starclan light their paths." Trufflefur dipped his head.

If I were a different cat, like my father or Jadestar... could I have protected them? The Riverclan apprentice wondered. *Even if it had killed me, I think I'd have saved their lives.*

What's wrong with me? I keep failing. Crescentpaw couldn't help but blame her lost claws. The apprentice's white paws were barely visible amongst the dark, mossy den floor.

I miss you, Everfrost. And she hoped she'd never fail Tinypaw or Cheetah the way that she had failed the Skyclan cats today.

"I was supposed to travel around the territories the day after Crescentpaw left." Lagoonstripe looked over at her temporary apprentice with a simmering stare.

She flattened her ears and gave a shrug. "Sorry. I mean, I *am* supposed to be a warrior by now."

"Crescentpaw went in my place without telling anyone but Cheetah. Who in turn shared it with me, and thank Starclan she did." Lagoonstripe's meow was full of annoyance.

Alpinefog grinned. Tinypaw looked defensive, while Cheetah glanced over at her friend with admiration.

The woven bramble ceiling above them creaked underneath the lashing rain. Luckily, the warriors den was one of the last strong-standing dens. No water managed to get through the thick woven vine above their heads.

"My sister brought the clans back. Give her some credit," Tinypaw snapped. "They *just* faced down a wolf on the way here, and barely escaped with their lives." The tiny black she-cat's voice held the hint of a warning.

"Some of them didn't, actually."

Jadestar turned her head and began to meow shrewdly.

"I can see that it's not just Crescentpaw who's outspoken. That

seems like a common trait amongst Riverclan apprentices." Her gaze was mild, but her tone condescending.

"You've only just arrived. Let's not go there just yet." Lagoonstripe sounded sardonically sweet, as if she could flip that behavior backwards on the flick of a minnow.

"Besides, our apprentices have grown up with hardships. I'm sure yours have as well, and that makes them more independent and intent on making their own decisions. Whether they're the RIGHT ones or not," she added loudly at the end. Crescentpaw hunched her shoulders and gave a nervous laugh.

"Sorry, Lagoonstripe. I get it." She kept quiet after that.

But I can't say I won't do it again.

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[image] [image]

A blanket of body heat was settled across the bramble-walled warriors den. The cats stayed awake and conversed for awhile longer. Cheetah wandered across the dark den and up to Rainpaw.

"Hello! Your fur is cool. It's like lake-blueish gray. Do you think mines cool? My grandcat says we have special fur."

"Uh- thanks." Rainpaw sat down as she answered the exuberant spotted she-cat.

"It's cool... and where is she?" The Skyclan apprentice looked around with a vague expression, as if she expected to see a cat like Cheetah in the small crowd.

"Oh, she's not here. She lives on the edge of Twolegplace about a day's travel from here." Cheetah was loud and expressive as she said it, tail waving.

"Her name is Caracal and she has a darker spotted pelt than me. Most of the time she's really fun and lively for a grandcat, so that's why I love her" she overshared.

This time Crescentpaw was embarrassed for her. Thankfully, though- none of the older cats seemed to be listening. Only Trufflefur and Rainpaw were facing toward Cheetah.

Emberfawn and Racoonstripe chatted together in a corner of the denspace. Houndspots groomed his short brown-and-white fur. Lagoonstripe whispered next to Alpinefog, while the Skyclan leader Jadestar and her deputy Sootface sat aloof.

Hail began to smack down on the den roof and walls. Crescentpaw saw a few tiny pellets hit the ground and roll in through the entryway. All of the cats kept their outstretched tails far away from it, grateful that they weren't outside.

She doubted that any wolves would approach Riverclan's camp tonight.

That young one must've been on its way back to its den, wherever that is.

"So we didn't lose anyone to the wolves while I was gone.. but are there any injuries?" She asked the eldest Riverclan warriors after they paused in conversation.

"We were attacked at pre-dawn, on the night that you stayed in Thunderclan's camp. Three warriors have light injuries, but only one is life-threatening."

Houndspots has severe bruises and a laceration on his belly."

"A laceration?" She asked, concerned.

"It's a deep bite wound that opened up his stomach," Quietdew fretted. "When he walks, the skin tries to open and expose the wound. The bleeding has been difficult to stop. And we can't keep it closed."

Alpinefog's green eyes were distressed as well. "He's been off his warrior duties since then. But he's still determined to train Tinypaw instead of letting us handle the mentoring. "

"I can do it myself," the brown-and-white warrior riposted with a superior heir. Crescentpaw felt her eyelids growing heavy as she listened.

I can't stay awake for much longer. Dawn isn't far off now.

"We need to decide our next course of action." Jadestar's voice was commanding, as she lifted her head to look over all the cats in the den.

Several pairs of eyes turned toward the Skyclan leader.

"That's true, but not tonight. It's late and Crescentpaw and Oatkit are exhausted," Alpinefog declared in an inarguable tone.

The tabby-and-white apprentice glanced around until she found Pepperpelt's crouched figure. Oatkit's eyes were already closed. He shivered as he huddled behind his demoralized mother. The queen's gaze was slitted.

Pepperpelt seemed to be far away, her mind reliving something.

He's right. We are tired. Her head was swaying, and she didn't bother trying to hide it. It didn't matter anyways. It was so near-black in the warriors den that hardly any cat could make out another.

"You can go to sleep, Crescentpaw. Here, get into this nest just to your far left." Cheetah urged her into a bracken nest, which looked like it had been newly prepared for the returning clan warriors.

"I'll take your prey-bones out after the hail stops."

"Thank you," she said sincerely as Tinypaw shifted to put a paw over her flank.

A few of the warriors strode to their nests, intent on returning to sleep. Quietdew grouchily shoved her nose into her tail, trying to rest on the quietest side of the den.

Cheetah didn't lie down. Instead she strutted over to Jadestar and meowed "What's Skyclan like? Is your prey the same as Thunderclan's? Why are you guys big like Riverclan, but not thick-furred?"

Crescentpaw didn't listen to the leader's answer. *I need to rest. I can't give myself much time for pause. I've got to push myself harder, do more, make more things happen.*

Tinypaw settled into the same nest, her flank touching Crescentpaw's. A rumble of thunder shook the skies outside again. Hail pelted down on the den roof, creating a resounding white noise that soothed the cats inside.

Tomorrow I'll start thinking about step two of restoring the clans. Maybe I can do it right this time.

Crescentpaw drifted off to sleep with her dual-colored eyes closed.

She felt safe beside Tinypaw.

Cloverkit, Hillflower, I hope you feel safe up in Starclan too. A cool breeze blew in through the dark den entrance, smelling of wet bracken and peaty earth.

The last thing she heard was Tinypaw's purr in her ear.

"I know none of the other cats said it, but I'm proud of you, sister. Sleep well."

_____

Tinypaw

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[image] [image]

"Hey, get up. It's sunrise and Jadestar wants all cats in the clearing." It was Quietdew, poking her muzzle into the den.

Crescentpaw strolled out and into a pale-grey dawn. The sky still streamed with thin rainfall, so all of the others were gathered beneath a thick-leaved rowan tree. There was a bushy line of sedgegrass growing behind the sitting warriors.

She plodded through puddles on her way over, yawning massively with her jaws extended. Crescentpaw sat down beside Lagoonstripe, expecting to go out on patrol. But then she realized that Lagoonstripe was adamately arguing, not performing her stand-in deputy duties.

"Whether you like it or not I have to send out at least *one* hunting patrol. Now that we're all awake, we're going to be hungry soon. There's nothing left on the freshkill pile." Lagoonstripe squared up to Jadestar with defiance, her silvery pelt ruffled.

Alpinefog nodded, his cool gaze a lot more mediating as he took a nonchalant step between them. "We can put off the dawn patrol, but not the early hunting patrol. The hunting cats will just have to get the news from the other warriors when they return." He tilted his head in an appeasing manner.

"Fine," Jadestar eventually sniffed. "Don't blame me if information gets confused because not every cat got to hear about it."

"He just said that they will," Racoonstripe muttered.

"From the *source*," Jadestar hissed.

How long have they been arguing?

Crescentpaw searched the mass of sitting and standing cats for the

other apprentices. Tinypaw, Cheetah, Rowanpaw, and Rainpaw were all there. They too watched Lagoonstripe, waiting for her instructions while she lashed her tail impatiently.

"Raccoonstripe, Alpinefog, Quietdew, and Rowanpaw. Take a hunting patrol to the south-flowing stream. Stay in the more exposed areas, where you can't be ambushed. If Crescentpaw and the others were attacked at sunfall then there's a chance that wolves could attack your patrol as well." She shook her head somberly.

"No time of day is safe, but we have to hunt at some point."

"I want to go." Trufflefur meowed and took a step forward. His coat looked glossy and healthy beside his rounded, oval face.

"Good. The more cats the better. If you split up to hunt ground prey, make sure you're staying close together. I want cats fishing *within sight* of each other." Lagoonstripe's meow was emphasized.

Trufflefur nodded.

A fat raindrop made its way through the tree cover and onto Crescentpaw's eartip. She shook it off and shivered, spine twitching. Her thick fur was still clumpy and under-groomed.

"On another note, why are you still marking the borders?" Jadestar asked after the cats meowed farewell.

"We respect and uphold the warrior code, that's why." Lagoonstripe said in a sour-sweet tone again.

"Yet you dismiss other Warrior Code rules. You don't even have your own clan leader to follow. You haven't appointed a deputy after your previous one died. Smallsmarrow, wasn't it?"

Emberfawn's face contorted into an insufferable expression. Crescentpaw almost laughed.

"There's more important things to discuss," Tinypaw snapped from farther back in the crowd.

"Good point. Thank you, Tinypaw."

"Riverclan apprentices need taught to keep quiet," Sootface muttered under his breath. The strengthening dawn light was turning his back fur to wheaten yellow.

Why, so we can never say a single word like your daughter? Crescentpaw thought.

"Good point. Thank you, Sootface. My deputy," Jadestar meowed pointedly.

"We aren't anything less because we don't have a deputy!" Emberfawn meowed loudly. "And in fact most of our 'outspoken apprentices' are of warrior age!"

Sootface rolled his eyes. "So we've heard."

It was cool and moist beneath the tree, with well-drained peaty earth beneath their pads. Somehow the cats that didn't usually argue were becoming triggered by a tail-flick.

"Our apprentices don't advise us, they just add on their opinions." Houndspots grunted.

The heated discussion paused after that. Tinypaw's eyes were huge, as if she couldn't believe Jadestar's audacity towards scolding them already.

And I agree. It's not a good look, when she just got here.

Cheetah had one ear flattened. Crescentpaw thought she looked confused about why every cat was so combative.

Crescentpaw decided to speak up. "What do you think our next course of action should be, Jadestar?" After she asked, she leaned down to begin grooming her matted fur. *It's gotten to be in horrid condition over the last few days. Always wet or matted!*

"We have to send some cats to the Moonpool, obviously. We must appoint a new medicine cat and flee the territories." Rain dripped off of Jadestar's whiskers.

"If Starclan gives us a sign then we'll know which direction to go."

Beside her, Sootface nodded. His blocky black muzzle was crisscrossed with scars.

"For that, I agree." Houndspots said. The warrior's short brown-and-white pelt was spiky from the drizzled rain.

He sat awkwardly to avoid stretching out his wound. Crescentpaw paused in her grooming to try and catch a glimpse of it, but Houndspots was facing away.

"But two of the clans- technically three if we include Thunderclan, are lost now." Cheetah spoke up. "Will Starclan have a solution for that?"

Jadestar twitched droplets from her whiskers. Her stormy grey pelt was flat against her sharp green eyes.

"They'll have to, if they want the other clans restored. So I'll send-"

"I'll go by myself again." Crescentpaw interrupted her, opening her jaws quickly enough to blurt the words out.

The silence was fleeting after that. *I sound insane.*

Tinypaw came closer and hissed "No! Not again, Crescentpaw! You didn't even tell me before you went last time. YOU HAVE TO TELL YOUR LITTERMATE FIRST."

Sootface said "See what I mean?" The tom swiveled his head around as if expecting some cat to agree with him.

"Okay, that's definitely not happening." Lagoonstripe turned a disapproving gaze on her. "My apprentice, acting or not, still hasn't been punished for doing that the first time!"

"So you *are* going to punish her?" Sootface interjected.

"I don't know yet." The lanky warrior's shrug was full of impatience, as if Lagoonstripe were holding onto her last nerve.

"I'm certainly not discussing it with Skyclan's deputy, but one might think that seeing multiple cats die is punishment enough."

Crescentpaw's tail swished across the grassy earth. She tried to hide her resentment by licking a white forepaw and drawing it over her ear.

They don't understand. And she could tell that causing a scene and trying to argue wouldn't help.

I have to go. If I don't go two or three cats, however many they send could die!

But how was she supposed to convince them? Crescentpaw had to supress a sigh. She sat through the rest of the discussion until it was decided that Jadestar, Emberfawn and Alpinefog would travel to the Moonpool.

"Quietdew is going to be upset that we're sending her kin," Houndspots advised calmly. His rumbling mew resounded with the pattering rain.

"We can't do anything about that." Sootface mewed.

"Let him stay behind with his mother and send another warrior," Pepperpelt croaked.

Crescentpaw couldn't help but notice the Skyclan cats once again rebelling against every single decision that Riverclan made. Lagoonstripe was frowning when Crescentpaw looked over at her.

"He's a young Riverclan tom. If he wants to go, let him." Sootface argued against his clanmate Pepperpelt this time. His tufty ears held clinging dewdrops.

Emberfawn shrugged uncertainly. Then he puffed out his chest, trying to save his own ego.

"I mean, if I wasn't chosen I'd have been okay with that. But now that I am, I'll protect Jadestar and Alpinefog with my life." There was no fear in his voice.

"Good. Those are a warriors words, young tom."

"He has a name, you know." Crescentpaw commented airily, to

which Tinypaw chortled.

"Just ask him his name."

Sootface fumed, his large black ears flattening like a fox in a fit.

"Right, then it's settled." Jadestar said quickly. "We'll send those cats tomorrow morning. If the skies are clear by then, there'll be no reason to wait."

"Shouldn't they have a day to rest? Since they don't have energy-herbs?" Cheetah cut in. Her whiskers were drooping with the weight of water-droplets. Crescentpaw stopped cleaning her tail and looked over at the spotted she-cat.

"Traveling-herbs," the apprentice whispered toward her friend.

Cheetah was standing beside Emberfawn. The ruddy-red tomcat glanced at her with an agreeable expression.

"Traveling herbs, I mean."

"Yes. Thanks for mentioning that, Cheetah. Those three warriors are off duty for the remainder of the day. Gather your strength."

Cheetah's expression was collective. Her gaze grew proud as she stood beside the Riverclan warriors.

"I'll tell Alpinefog when he gets back," Emberfawn meowed.

The fur on Crescentpaw's shoulders and forehead was soaked. She shook her pelt. *The forest'll be even worse. But I'm ready to go.*

"Wait- Cheetah? Why is her name like that?" Jadestar asked.

Crescentpaw's eyes widened. She looked over at Skyclan's leader with dread.

Starclan, no! Nothing could've prepared her for the world of impatience she experienced next.

After the Riverclan warriors and Cheetah herself explained, Jadestar argued on and on about their '*reckless decision'* of '*letting a kittypet join the clan'* during a '*moon of carnage*.' Or something like that.

Crescentpaw impatiently waited for her assignment. When her acting mentor finally led her out of camp, she was raring to go. And she hadn't even eaten.

The dripping Riverclan forest smelled muggy and dank. A heavy humidity settled upon the two cat's backs as they padded across the verdant woody wetlands. Silvery willow branches stretched toward them, dispersing dewdrops onto the reeds and riverbanks.

I'll sneak away from Lagoonstripe as fast as possible. As soon as she looks the other away, the Riverclan apprentice thought.

_____

Crescentpaw

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[image]
[image]
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"Eager to train since you've been gone, I see." Her acting mentor said awhile later.

Crescentpaw awkwardly meowed, "Um, yeah."

Get to it already. I know the real reason you sent Cheetah out on a hunting patrol. To lecture me.

Wet fronds shivered beside them in the early breeze, shaking droplets onto Lagoonstripe's fur.

"Look, Crescentpaw." The Riverclan warrior avoided her gaze at first.

Here it is.

Lagoonstripe's long limbs stepped over some dislodged stones carefully, her shoulders rising and dipping as she expertly maneuvered Riverclan's wet terrain.

"I'm proud of you for what you've accomplished already." Lagoonstripe surprised her by saying.

"And the fact that you're still willing to train without the promise of your warrior name, well... that's admirable for a young cat, no one can deny."

Crescentpaw felt the warmth of her praise falter. The end had slumped her pride.

"Yeah..." *But just because I don't ask for my warrior name doesn't mean I don't want it.* She couldn't hide the frown that showed on her face now.

"The problem is you've got to tell cats what you're planning. You know that if you had died, most of us would've never gotten to say goodbye?"

You wouldn't let me go if I told you. Crescentpaw wanted to argue with her replacement mentor. The words were simmering on the edge of her tongue.

Yet something told her that if she tried, Sootface and Jadestar would also stand in her way. It was hard for the tabby apprentice to bite the words back.

You wouldn't let me join the Starclan journey last night when I openly *asked!* Riverclan's late greenleaf forestry blurred out of focus around her. She nearly slipped on some wet stones.

Well, she hadn't really asked to join. She had moreso demanded to go on her own. *Still.*

Older cats just don't get it. The Riverclan apprentice almost rolled her eyes, despite understanding what her mentor was telling her.

"Yes, I'm sorry." She swished her dark tabby-and-white tail and left it at that.

"Good. Let's make our way to the training ravine."

Lagoonstripe didn't ask for a promise; and thank Starclan she didn't. *As soon as I get the chance, I'm slipping away.*

~The training ravine~

Crescentpaw was taken for battle training with her acting mentor. She was quick and efficient at first; only messing up in more advanced areas. But whenever she had to be corrected, she felt that time slowed down. Which further frustrated her and caused her to falter.

"You're tired? Or distracted." Lagoonstripe meowed knowingly with an interrogative gaze. She sat back, ending the fast-flowing battle training.

"Uh, both. Sorry..."

"You want to talk to Tinypaw and Cheetah?" the Riverclan warrior pricked her ears.

"I saw them come out of the den before you, saying they shouldn't wake you up after such a long journey. But then Quietdew woke you up anyways."

Lagoonstripe tipped her head, sharp green eyes intelligent and watchful. "And you fell asleep last night, so you haven't had the chance to talk to them alone."

"Yes!" Crescentpaw blurted, taking the opportunity and nodding eagerly. "I worried about them while I was gone, and I haven't gotten the chance to properly speak to them yet."

Please please please believe it please believe it please.

Look how sincere my face is looking see how sincere and truthful I'm looking? Crescentpaw rounded her eyes and sat with her paws neat and straight.

Her mentor nodded and then sat back.

"Don't pretend I don't notice things, like the fact that your fur was a hot mess this morning." Lagoonstripe chuckled. The she-cat's own fur was unruffled and neat, in a feminine way.

"I was an apprentice once," she smiled, her eyes twinkling. "Believe it or not. So that's how I could tell how you were feeling." Lagoonstripe blinked, as Crescentpaw stood still in waiting.

Close enough. "Yeah. Thank you, Lagoonstripe!"

"Okay. Then go, take your time and get it all out. I'll retrieve you later."

No you won't. But Crescentpaw still appreciated her mentor for this. It was better than having to sneak away.

As she turned to leap the ravine's margin, she stopped, hearing

Lagoonstripe call after her again.

"I've sent them fishing with Racoonstripe near the Twoleg Bridge!"

Oh, right. Because Houndspots is injured.

She dug in her back paws and leaped out of the training ravine. The rain was brisk as she dodged past the trees.

If Tinypaw has to fish in front of Raccoonstripe then she'll be quite embarrassed. But at least the twoleg bridge isn't prone to wolf attacks.

More water splashed onto her legs as she ran. *It's only a matter of time before one of us gets caught without claws. Surely it hasn't happened already, or some cat would've mentioned it by now.* Crescentpaw rounded some overgrown bracken stalks and jumped off a short gully. She unfurled her paws from her chest before she hit the ground.

So how did my littermate get up a tree when the wolves were injuring Houndspots? Crescentpaw was going to ask her in order to find out. Could Tinypaw have run off and simply hid in a den?

She saw a fallen tree ahead of her next. It was a massive oak that had been torn up during the storm.

The she-cat raced beside it and pushed onward. She didn't have much time if she wanted to make it to the Moonpool before moonhigh.

Crescentpaw leaped over a ditch, paws slamming into the opposite rise and pushing off into a sprint again. Her tabby fur was soiled, completely obliterating the efforts of this morning's groom.

Oh well. She could always groom it again later.

She had a few questions to ask her sister. And this time she would make sure to tell Tinypaw her plan first, before any other cat.

———————

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[image]

[image]

Tinypaw and Crescentpaw

Crescentpaw pushed herself hard on the way there. It had stopped raining around sunhigh, but every single sedge, bush and blade of grass along her path was laden with water. The apprentice was soaked by the time she caught sight of Racoonstripe's hunting patrol.

"It's gonna be rabbit tonight!" The striped tom announced. He was dragging a young rabbit back toward two cats sitting beside a wide river channel. The tom's neck was bent as Crescentpaw crossed the sloping hilltop she was on, nearly slipping and losing her footing on the wet grass.

"You were lucky to find that all the way out here, so close to that Twoleg bridge." Tinypaw meowed, her words hard to catch from afar.

"Yeah, but that's just what a skilled Riverclan tom can do." Raccoonstripe sounded boastful as he gripped the rabbits scruff.

"I caught a fish too!" Cheetah reached out a paw and touched a small scaly carp that laid beside her, one that she had hauled out before Crescentpaw got there.

"I'll catch something any minute now," Tinypaw said determinedly, but Crescentpaw almost couldn't hear it. Their voices were wavering and distorted on the breeze.

She was padding down the steep slope towards the three cats when a gust of wind nearly blew her off her paws.

Starclan, please don't let me fall in front of them! They were bound to turn their heads and notice her at any moment.

Crescentpaw hissed when she eventually did slip in some mud, sliding closer to the dirt-path conjoining with the twoleg bridge beyond. She picked herself up, noticing that the other cats had seen her.

A shoulder-deep brook chattered close to their paws. Water churned across stones farther upstream, throwing a thin spray of droplets into the air.

Embarassed, Crescentpaw padded through the last stretch of sedge-grass before she reached them. Her pelt was tufted with streaked mud when she made it to the hunting patrol. A few pink flowers and grass stalks clung to her flanks.

"Hey Crescentpaw!" Cheetah trilled with welcome.

"You look awful," Racoonstripe laughed as his gaze flitted over her.

Out of breath, she murmured "-needa talk to Tinypaw and Cheetah." Then she lifted her head and stared pointedly at Racoonstripe.

"Alone."

"Wait, I want to hear." The striped tom said immediately.

"Then you're nosy," Tinypaw complained, rolling her eyes. Her sister began picking the debris from her fur.

"But I want to hear as well, if it's interesting." He insisted again.

"If it's about your journey yesterday. If- as long as it's not about boring she-cat stuff like decorating shells and the cutest toms and-"

"We get it," Tinypaw meowed.

"Fine, but please mostly shut up while I say it. I haven't got any time and I've got to go." Crescentpaw smoothed her chest-fur down, exasperated that she was once again pressed for time.

Racoonstripe's eyes opened wide in disbelief. Then the hefty tom opened his jaws in a laugh, his spiky teeth flashing.

"You're leaving on your own *again*? Do you have a death wi-"

His mew died in his throat.

"Sorry." Crescentpaw continued glaring at him, and the heavyset tom had the decency to keep quiet. Beside her, Cheetah began quivering with anticipation.

The spotted she-cat's ears pricked up and her mouth popped open before she exclaimed "Ooh! Let me go with you this time! Please! I already saw a wolf the other night. I know what they are now."

"Go where? The Moonpool?" Tinypaw's large eyes were sharp and questioning. The she-cat's smaller muzzle and paws made her look dainty.

Crescentpaw opened her jaws, then closed them, nodding. She stared at her spotted friend incredulously, then said;

"You saw one injure Houndspots and you weren't scared?"

"Well, that's not what I meant." Cheetah clarified, blinking her golden eyes. "I meant I wasn't *that* scared because I was up in a tree before they arrived." The she-cat explained.

"Whenever their scent flowed into camp at sunfall that evening, the clan knew they were coming. Lagoonstripe made me climb a tree. Most of the other warriors did the same, and the only cat who got seriously hurt was Houndspots."

"Him and Quietdew tried to save some prey we had left on the fresh-kill pile. They thought letting the wolves eat it would only encourage them to come back," Tinypaw further explained.

Crescentpaw frowned. She couldn't decide whether it was brave or stupid, but they were getting off track.

"Okay." *How did my littermate escape when the wolves came, though?* The tabby she-cat's eyes bore into Tinypaw, but she couldn't ask in

front of Racoonstripe.

"I have to head for the Moonpool now, before Lagoonstripe tries to take me out on patrol or another training session."

"Wait! You haven't even *talked* to us." Tinypaw sounded annoyed again. "And I'm guessing you haven't eaten, either? Your ribs are starting to show, and it's about to be leaf-fall!"

"You can eat my fish!" Cheetah chimed in, clearly eager to share. Crescentpaw was tempted, but she knew she had to leave.

"No, I haven't. But I've still got to go now. I can hunt on the way. Windclan is empty and I might come across a hare out there, if I make it before sundown."

I probably won't be able to catch a hare. I'm really gonna regret that decision of a missed meal later. She pictured the hunger pains that would gnaw at her belly soon.

Whatever. Crescentpaw would ignore it.

A warrior can go hungry for the sake of their clan.

"There could also be *wolves* swamping their land after sundown. And you won't make it back before then, no matter how fast you run or visit with Starclan." Raccoonstripe warned her, but Crescentpaw was very much aware.

Didn't I already tell you to keep quiet?

"She's gonna go see Starclan," Cheetah meowed in awe.

"I bet Starclan will protect her on the journey."

Crescentpaw had to stop herself from flattening her ears uncertainly. *I don't even know if Starclan will speak to a warrior apprentice.*

"I'm coming with you to the edge of Riverclan's territory." Tinypaw huffed. "And this time, it actually *is* about boring she-cat stuff."

The nifty apprentice lifted her tail and sauntered over to her littermate, passing Raccoonstripe with a guarded expression. He wrinkled his nose.

"Bleh, okay. Lagoonstripe won't like you returning to camp on your own, though."

"She won't be alone. I'm coming too!"
Cheetah got up to touch noses with Crescentpaw, purring. The clouds behind her were fleecy and light, finally relieved of the day's worth of rain.

"Tinypaw has something to tell you, but I just missed you." Cheetah butted her in the shoulder with her head, and Crescentpaw playfully swatted at her ear.

"See you at camp, 'Coonstripe!" Cheetah meowed a cheerful farewell, sauntering off beside Tinypaw and Crescentpaw.

The three she-cats walked with their flanks brushing. Crescentpaw was in-between Cheetah and her littermate, so that she could hardly turn around.

"Hey, Cheetah! You forgot your fish!" Racoonstripe yowled after them. They ignored him. They were too busy conversing to hear his words.

"You know we're not letting you go by yourself, right?" Tinypaw looked at her sternly. Crescentpaw's face crinkled with dismay, and Tinypaw immediately displayed attitude.

"No, I'm not hearing none of it!" She spat, her tone sounding very similar to Vixeneye's in their early kit-days.

"I already know what your excuses will be. Save it, Cres. I don't care."

Crescentpaw bit her tongue. *I knew this is how she would act. It's why I didn't tell her the last time.*

"Oh, we're going too? I didn't know that." Cheetah sounded confused at first, and then enthusiasm crept into her tone.

"We're gonna be traveling across Windclan territory. And to the legendary Moonpool. Wow!" Her eyes seemed to glitter with anticipation.

Crescentpaw wanted to growl with frustration. A deep sense of foreboding settled in the pit of her stomach.

Perhaps it would be better to go with them...

She just hoped it didn't end up getting them killed.

Fun Fact: **Racoonstripe** *is chonk like a stereotypical Riverclan warrior*

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[image]

"I hid in that rock crevice behind the Highrock. I had to run because Quietdew almost beat me to it." Tinypaw explained when Crescentpaw asked how she avoided the wolves.

She thought of the cracked stone behind Highrock. Its crevice was deep and narrow, facing toward the dirtplace bramble walls and nearly impenetrable for an adult wolf.

"It was something I thought of before the fact, so I wouldn't expose myself. But I don't think it'll work every time." Tinypaw's meows turned bitter.

"Using the cleft seems to be Quietdew's survival strategy, so she doesn't have to run across the clearing or swarm up a tree with the other cats.

Usually she screams at Emberfawn to join her, but he never does."

"Emberfawn's nice, but I don't like his mom Quietdew. She doesn't like me either." Cheetah added to the conversation.

"Yeah, he's cool. Did you make friends with him?" Crescentpaw asked. Cheetah nodded, then burst out;

"Yeah! He's amazing. He actually asked me to hunt the other day, it was crazy. And he said he likes fishing. He showed me this cool fishing spot underneath a weeping willow tree, and we talked so long the sun almost set without us noticing!" Cheetah giggled.

Crescentpaw purred. "That sounds nice." She was happy for her friend.

"Crescentpaw, I've been meaning to tell you something. It's not good news." Tinypaw looked ashamed, her eyes downcast. The lithe she-cat stared at her paws as they sank into the peaty earth.

"What?" The tabby apprentice's mew was apprehensive.

"Houndspots *knows!*" She burst out, while Cheetah bounded over a fallen twig ahead of them.

"I... It was my fault. I told him. I screwed up, because he kept pressuring me about my training and asking if something was wrong and saying there must be something off with me, I-"

"Slow down." Crescentpaw's steps dwindled to a stop, as she murmured at her sister with concern.

"It's okay. What happened right before you told him?"

"Well-..." she flattened her ears.

"Houndspots started arguing with me about how I haven't been hunting or changing nests well. I lied and told him I'd had a crush on Tidepaw, so that it would explain the change in my training after we returned."

Crescentpaw nodded. Houndspots would believe it, since Tidepaw had died while they were trapped in the Twoleg nest, and they had found out after their return.

"But he said that was no excuse to perform so poorly in training. He pushed me, and argued, and scolded me. He said that since I couldn't catch a single fish in days, then what was I good for? So I blew up on him," Tinypaw explained. Cheetah turned on her heels and watched with genuine interest, although she had most likely already heard it before.

"I told him the real reason why I'm failing my training. That the twoleg took my claws." she swiped at a leaf-stalk that was growing in her walking path. It flicked back up, unscathed.

"And, surprisingly, his reaction caught me off guard." Crescentpaw stared at her sister, fully invested in whatever came next.

"He said it was okay. Houndspots said that it wasn't my fault, that he would help me hide my secret from the rest of the clan." The she-cats gaze softened thoughtfully.

"I was questioned about my future, though." Tinypaw lifted her velvety black muzzle, whiskers twitching as she scented the wind. "He asked me if I planned to flee the clans, become a loner or rogue or kittypet; if things ever got too bad."

Cheetah opened her jaws to say something, but Tinypaw spoke over her.

"I said no, but that I still don't know my place in the clan." The little she-cat sighed. Her waving tail brushed the honeysuckle shrubs beside them. Their yellow flowers smelt of pollen.

"It sucks. I'm already not regarded as capable as you are, Crescentpaw. I'm small, and I'm not as out-spoken as you guys. Plus I'm finding it harder to catch things without claws..."

"You're just as capable as I am, though, Tinypaw." She touched her sisters shoulder with her tail-tip.

"He asked me if I wanted to be a medicine cat, and all I could say was I don't know!" Tinypaw was tense in her uncertainty.

"I've just never thought of a destiny like that. My whole kithood I wanted to be a warrior and help my clan by hunting and fighting." Tinypaw spoke in a quiet ramble as she opened up to them.

"But if I can't help Riverclan, if I can't catch prey during the long and harsh-leaf bares..." she trailed off.

Crescentpaw nuzzled her, drawing her tail along the she-cat's back.

"It's alright, Tinypaw. You'll learn how to do it. And no matter what, you'll always be helpful. To the clan and to me." She purred.

"Thanks." Tinypaw sighed shakily, returning Crescentpaw's affection with an appreciative nod.

"The day after that, he got attacked by that wolf. And now the other warriors are wanting to take over his training. He won't let them in order to protect me." Something changed in Tinypaw's gaze, a different kind of anguish than what was before. And Crescentpaw could tell that she was thankful for her mentor.

"I didn't expect that of Houndspots," Crescentpaw murmured. "He's an admirable cat for that."

"His wound isn't getting any better," her littermate fretted. "I hope that Starclan can find us a medicine cat soon. Like, by the return of this trip soon."

She nodded.

"Let's hurry then." The three she-cats increased their pace as they left Riverclan territory behind, crossing a flat stretch of boggy land that surrounded the Horseplace. Cheetah's ears were pricked again, and she walked ahead of them with a confident gait.

Windclan territory rose and dipped in a roiling expanse of bendy hills beyond them. The sun had passed its highest point in the sky, and now its slanted, piercing rays were burning off the last remnants of humidity. The earth steamed in places, drying after the long night's rain. Their shoulders grew weary and aching, yet on they walked.

Crescentpaw wasn't inclined to stop and hunt along the way, despite the gnawing hunger that soon befell her. Her stomach protested, but at her direction they all padded on.

The sun began to push shadows farther and farther across the earth, and the Riverclan cats slowed their pace. They were getting closer to the Moonpool. The earth was more compact here, with shorter grasses and course grit underpaw.

"Want to take a break?" Tinypaw asked. The brush shivered in the breeze behind her.

Crescentpaw's haunches were screaming at her to stop. After checking the position of the overcast moon, she shook her head.

"No. We have to reach to the Moonpool before moon-high. Let's keep going before we rest."

However, she found that she regretted her decision after that. The way was so slow-going and sore that Crescentpaw felt a headache coming on.

After they splashed through a shallow Windclan stream she felt a light breeze lifting her fur. Crescentpaw watched the wind tussle the long, furling Windclan grasses. The sky was a sheet of grey, with a few nacreous clouds sprawled across it.

As they stepped into pooling shadows, a treeless valley swallowed them up. Heather lined its rocky edges. Leaving Windclan's territory behind, the cats stepped purposively forward.

"I wish we could have our warriors names," Tinypaw meowed painstakingly. She stepped around some gorse thickets, her footfalls heavy.

"Crescentpaw, do you think we could ask Jadestar to do it? Even though she's Skyclan's leader," Tinypaw asked. She didn't sound very confident in her own question, though.

"It wouldn't lead anywhere if we tried." Crescentpaw flicked a muddy leaf off her paw.

"Jadestar won't appoint any new warriors or apprentices. Not while the clans are without Starclan, and in such a dire situation against the wolves."

"So that's why Oatkit and Rainpaw look way older than their names..." Tinypaw grumbled, probably annoyed at another dead end.

"Well, maybe Starclan will appoint Riverclan's new leader soon, and they can give us our warrior names."

"Why not just do it yourselves?" Cheetah asked abruptly, and the two littermates turned on their heels.

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[image]

"What do you mean? Like conduct a warrior ceremony... on our own?" Tinypaw mewed, sounding appalled.

"Well, yeah." Cheetah looked up the dark sloping ridge, where thick barberry bushes were sprouting high above the nearby bracken.

"You could complete your assesment by catching one piece of prey on this new terrain after nightfall." She flicked a fallen oak leaf out of her way. "If you succeed in the time that's left before Moonhigh, then we could have the ceremony."

They were silent for a moment.

"I haven't scented any prey since we set paw outside of Windclan. So it would be difficult to find some..." Tinypaw began skeptically.

"When?" Crescentpaw impulsively asked.

Tinypaw's eyes widened. "We can't, Crescentpaw! Warriors have to hold a vigil."

"Right before we visit the Moonpool." Cheetah looked at them diligently.

"After all, Starclan can see that you've waited long enough. They know you're past warrior-age. And you could hold your warrior vigils tomorrow, when we get back to camp."

"...This is a crazy idea. We don't have the authority." Tinypaw sounded baffled. She had one ear flattened, and her tail flicked as she fought to explain herself.

"I mean... for one, picking our own warrior names? No cat does that. In fact, it might be better to wait and see if *Starclan* will pick them for us-"

"We've *been* waiting and seeing, Tinypaw." Crescentpaw cut her off before she could fully disperse from the idea.

In a way, it was beginning to warm on her. The thought of having her warrior name by tonight was enthralling. The dark tabby she-cat's eyes glimmered at the prospect of it.

What if I don't do this now, and Riverclan never gets new leadership?

"You could pick warrior names for each other, that way it's more acceptable." Cheetah straightened, advocacy in her tone. "If I understand it right, it's more customary for other cats to give you parts of your name because that's what mother-cats do for the word preceding 'kit', isn't it?"

"Yes."

Well... I think it's a worthwhile idea. Tinypaw?"

"Wait! I'm thinking!" Tinypaw growled at her.

"What if Starclan or our clanmates don't accept our names?" She looked up over at them, worried.

"You don't have to tell them-" Cheetah began, but Crescentpaw wanted to put her sister's mind at ease.

"If they keep calling us 'paws after we've visited Starclan for them, then they're fish-brained!" She declared, lifting a white forepaw indignantly.

Tinypaw still looked doubtful. "It might be more complicated than that. I mean, it's not like they asked us to come... and we disobeyed orders by up and leaving."

Crescentpaw waved her paw and sat it back down. "I know, I know! But you get my point." The dark shadows behind her nearly camouflaged the tabby parts of her pelt.

"Cheetah is right. We deserve this, and no cat should be able to keep it from us any longer." She was beginning to act stubborn.

I don't want to do it by myself, but either way I'm doing it.

Crescentpaw was being impulsive, and she didn't care.

Tinypaw held her frown for a little while longer. Then she gave an angry shrug, her eyes gleaming.

"You know what? Let's do it. It only works if we catch some prey anyways, and I'm starving. So why not?" Tinypaw winked at her, their disagreement dissipating.

"You'd better not give me a stupid warrior name, Crescentpaw!" The black-pelted apprentice warned affectionately.

Relieved, Crescentpaw felt her fur fluff out. She could hardly hide her delight.

I could be a warrior before the sun rises!

The two she-cats had to work together to find prey along the way. They couldn't risk splitting up in case a wolf crossed their path.

Every now and then a whisk of their musky scent would flow toward the she-cats, then be gone again in a breath. It whisked away on the wind, each time untraceable.

Cheetah stayed far behind, unheard in order to avoid disturbing their prey. Not a blade of grass twitched under her pawsteps. She had already learned Riverclan's stalking techniques well.

Crescentpaw caught a glimpse of her golden-spotted pelt between some shrubbery a few fox-lengths behind them. The apprentice opened her jaws to scent for prey, but all she could smell was the earthy night wind.

"Have you had a mock-assesment yet, Crescentpaw?" Tinypaw

whispered as they padded along shoulder-to-shoulder.

"No. Aquasplash never got around to giving me one." She sighed.

Tinypaw nodded, her gaze dark in the meager moonlight.

"Houndspots hasn't given me one yet either. He talked about it before we got captured in that twoleg trap, but now that my skills are... less capable- I don't see it happening anytime soon."

It was hard to see the she-cat's figure. She blended in with the dark spindly undergrowth.

"So I hope we pass this," Tinypaw went on after a sigh.

"Does it upset you? That we don't have claws anymore. And what that entails," Crescentpaw studied her sister as they walked. She slowed her pace a bit.

Deep down, she thought she already knew the answer.

"Well, yeah. Of course it does! I just wanted to become a warrior the normal way." Tinypaw's exasperated meows turned to a fearful tremor.

"And it's terrifying knowing that we could die at any moment." The she-cat's solid black fur was fluffed along her spine. Her tail flicked to and fro, as if she were unsettled.

"Me and you have less of a chance than other cats do.

And look at us. Out here by the Moonpool, with only a former kittypet for help!"

"Yeah." Crescentpaw let her gaze rest on the shorter she-cat.

"And assessments are supposed to be done separately," she admitted, frowning and looking at her paws. The tabby apprentice was beginning to second-guess this entire ordeal. She had a regrettable feeling in her gut.

This is all wrong... naming each other as warriors only felt like a good

idea earlier, in the face of Cheetah's encouraging round eyes. Cheetah always wanted other cats to use her ideas.

Now it feels like a reckless kit decision. They shouldn't have came here without a warrior, and she shouldn't have advocated for Cheetah's impetuous idea.

It was just a "solve-it-now-and-deal-with-it-later" kind of choice, wasn't it? It didn't feel honorable.

"You're right. We don't have our claws.... We won't be normal warriors if we do it this way. We might not be accepted." Crescentpaw didn't particularly care about that last part, but she knew her sister did.

"So maybe we just call this whole warrior thing off. Maybe hope for the best, instead?" The Riverclan she-cat flattened her ears. They were outlined by the faintest shine of moonlight.

Riverclan probably won't honor our warrior names anyway. Something painful pricked in her chest.

I just wanted to be a Riverclan warrior.

"Well..." Tinypaw looked apprehensive. As if she didn't want the choice taken away from her.

Surprised, Crescentpaw took a step closer and waited for her reply.

She doesn't want to stay an apprentice either.

"If this works, only Starclan can judge whether we deserve to call ourselves warriors." Her littermate took a breath.

"It might be a broken assessment. But I think we still deserve our names. Even if we're the only ones calling each other it."

Crescentpaw's eyes glowed as she nodded over at her kin. Tinypaw began stalking again, her jaws parted to taste the air.

Cheetah didn't assist when Tinypaw spotted a Cuckoo bird beneath a low-spreading blackberry bush just ahead of them. The prey-

animal pecked at shiny purple berries, its beak stained magenta and reflecting the sliverly moon above.

The Riverclan apprentices knew it was forbidden for other cats to help new warriors in their assessments. But Tinypaw had mentioned that she seriously needed help hunting without the use of her claws. Crescentpaw leaned closer to her whisper in her littermate's ear.

"Remember, curl your forepaws into your chest when you grab the bird. And deal the killing blow with your jaws. Use your back paws, even- if you have to. It doesn't matter if it's a messy kill," she advised.

Tinypaw gave the smallest, most inconceivable nod. Then she stalked forward with her tail lowered. She avoiding brushing some ferns between her and the Cuckoo bird.

Her littermate dispatched the bird with a well-timed paw-slam, drawing it into herself and sinking her fangs into its neck. Crescentpaw saw her eyes shimmer with relief.

She thought she wouldn't get it.

"Great job, Tinypaw! See? I told you that you could do it." She licked her littermate's forehead, and Tinypaw's tail waved appreciatively.

Cheetah took the bird from them as they moved off again. They were getting closer to the Moonpool, ambling along one of its adjacent overgrown paths. Crescentpaw heard an owl hoot from somewhere close-by.

A moment afterward she smelled mice. There was at least two or three, and Crescentpaw tracked them to the foot of a low-branched hawthorn shrub. Its olive leaves were thick and lucious, providing a comforting cover of shadow for the prey beneath the tree.

"Keep watch on the sky," the tabby-and-white apprentice murmured. "Make sure that owl doesn't come back."

The mice were scuttling beside some twisting brambles. Its spindly stems emerged from the bush mound and extended partway across

the earth.

A tricky position. I'll have to leap over that mess of bramble, or go around and risk alerting them.

She could sense at least two or three mice on the other side of it. She could hear their heartbeats.

Land prey has never been Riverclan's specialty, so Starclan's luck be with me.

Her sister left her to it. When Crescentpaw ambushed the mouse nest, she made sure to draw up short so she didn't over-step. One of the mice hurled towards the hawthorn's center trunk and disappeared into a root tangle.

Crescentpaw crouched and swiped, stunning one of the last two with frantic batting. She pulled it towards herself and bit down on the mouse's spine, dispatching it.

"Thank you, Starclan, for this prey."

She hadn't been skilled enough to catch the other one, though. It was so dark beneath the brush, with dappled patches of inky shadow from the thick leaf-coverage above her. She licked her lips and searched in vain for more, but they had obviously already gone.

"It's just one lousy mouse," she sighed and sat down to groom her paws on the spot.

"Hey, you caught something without claws! That's really difficult." Tinypaw meowed stubbornly.

"And you passed your assessment just in time," Crescentpaw." Cheetah approached just behind them. Dark leaves trembled and fluttered onto her back as she pushed through the branches of an elderberry bush.

It was true. They were only a few minutes walk from the Moonpool.

"Not catching the other mouse was just bad luck. It's so dark out here that a cat can barely see their own paws." Tinypaw encouraged

her, and Crescentpaw felt her bitterness fade.

You know what? For a clawless cat, I know I can do better. But that wasn't too bad.

Crescentpaw nodded, agreeing. Then she looked up at the moon, realizing its position.

"It's nearly Moonhigh!" The tabby-and-white apprentice meowed, leaping to her paws.

"We can carry the prey to the Moonpool's edge and eat there. We have to be on time, though. Let's go!"

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[image]
[image]

"It smells like wolf. We must be careful." Tinypaw cautioned.

"I think it's blowing down from these hills." Crescentpaw spoke while craning her neck, looking toward some blue-black hilltop edges. They nearly blended in with the sunless sky above.

Some of the knolls were uneven or rocky. Barren and craggy, they looked uninviting to cats. Spindly thornbushes, prickle plants and bramble thickets grew in swathes across parts of the hummocks. A few ash trees grew in scattered clusters at the foot of the them.

Adjacent to the Moonpool, but much higher up, these knolls carried hilltop winds down the slope and toward the foothills. Above them, a flock of crows cawed, making their way over.

"I smell it too." Cheetah's gaze was worrisome, and she flattened her spotted black ears. The golden she-cat stilled beside them, as Crescentpaw gazed at the claw-tipped moon above.

"We only have a few minutes to wait." She turned her gaze on Cheetah, her tone flat and serious.

"I need you to climb a tall tree. The one that's growing sideways on the edge of that hill." She nodded at the rim of a far-off slope.

"Watch out for wolves, especially around those ridges. Yowl if you see any."

"I will! I'll yowl louder than a kittypet asking their twoleg for wet food!" Her tail waved.

Tinypaw looked amused at her regale. Cheetah turned away, grinning over her shoulder as she padded away. She was swallowed

by the shadows lain upon the grove edges.

Crescentpaw had expected her to be upset, or even jealous.

Huh. She's fine with us having our warrior ceremonies without her. Cheetah hadn't even asked about getting her own 'paw name. She hadn't insisted to see the Moonpool either.

Surely Cheetah still wanted a mentor and a clan name. And yet she had encouraged them without mentioning her own problems. Crescentpaw purred.

In every way, Cheetah was revealing herself to be more competent as a potential Riverclan warrior. She hadn't complained a single time along the Moonpool journey.

"Although annoying, she's funny in a way." Her littermate nibbled at a grass seed stuck between her toes.

"Well, Crescentpaw. Go ahead and start. Say the words to give me my warrior name." Tinypaw walked over the lip of the Moonpool's edge, which was angled in a way that you had to walk up and over the swell to see it.

Crescentpaw followed her. *I'm going to become a Riverclan warrior now.*

She could finally prove herself as the adult cat that she was. She could have more allowances to make change within her clan. Within *all* the clans.

The she-cat was exhilarated when she saw the waterfall. Its top was lit with faint moonbeam, but Crescentpaw noticed that the water was still dark.

"A cloud is passing over the moon," Tinypaw reassured her before she could say something.

"By the time it moves it'll be Moonhigh, and the moon will shine in the reflection of the pool, I think..."

Is this right? One last prick of doubt wormed its way into her

thoughts. *Should we have waited for Riverclan's new leader to give us our names?*

And how much would their clanmates say about them? Her stomach churned again. *What if it gathers so much attention to us that they figure out we're missing our claws?*

The thing was, Crescentpaw couldn't bear to not tell them. She refused to have her own warrior name in her head, while the rest of her clan kept calling her 'Crescentpaw.'

"Any day now." Tinypaw jerked her from her thoughts.

"Uh-sorry." The tabby apprentice lifted her plumed tail. She stepped closer to the pool's gently lapping waves, which were still dark and reflecting dimly lit stars.

It should light up any moment now. The wispy cloud that was covering the moon was slowly edging its way across.

"Warrior ancestors," she began, hoping she was doing it right.

"I, Crescentpaw, call for you to look down upon this apprentice. She..." For a second, Crescentpaw struggled to remember. "-has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a Warrior in her turn." She took a deep breath, looking over her shoulder to gaze at Tinypaw.

"Do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your own life?"

"Yes." Tinypaw said without hesitation. Her meow had a hint of impatience, even.

"Then by the powers and will of Starclan, I give you your warrior name." She studied Tinypaw closely.

Really, it was a choice between two or three names. But Crescentpaw felt like she knew the best one.

Tinypaw padded closer, head tilted and violet eyes shining.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly. The she-cat's rippling black pelt shone upon her shoulders. Her legs and flanks were shrouded in darkness.

"From this moment forth you shall be known as Tinyflame. Starclan honors your commitment and I welcome you as a full warrior of Riverclan."

Her littermate's eyes reflected the few twinkling stars above. They were wide even as they crinkled with delight.

"Thank you, Crescentpaw!" She cried. "That's a brilliant name." Tinyflame's tail lifted, and she looked extremely pleased. She purred and rubbed against her sister's flank.

"Alright, alright! Now do me." Crescentpaw laughed, impatient in her turn. She was careful not to take her eyes off of her surroundings, though. She could still smell the dank wolf-scent on the wind.

It wasn't fresh per-say. The scent was musty and earthen, as if it had traveled a long way. *It has to be from one of those slopes. Where else could it be coming from?*

"I was worried you'd give me a weird warrior name." Tinyflame smoothed her unkempt fur. "Something like Tinytail or Tinyfur, because I'm so small." Her velvety muzzle was crinkled into a sheepish grin.

"Ohh- I see." Crescentpaw smirked. "Scared I might have picked Tinytoes?"

"No!" Tinyflame burst out laughing. "I just wanted something pretty," she mewed breathlessly after her chuckles tapered off.

"Nobody thinks of me as a pretty she-cat, you know. I've just got a boring old black pelt... so thank you, Crescentpaw. "

Crescentpaw's tone grew critical.

"*I* think you're pretty!"

It was true. Her sister's 'boring black pelt' was shinier than trout scales. Her legs and tail joined the rest of her in a sleek, wiry transition.

"Thanks." Tinyflame's large violet eyes blinked appreciatively. "Now- let me see if I can think of the perfect name for you while I try to remember all those words to the ceremony."

"I just said them!" Crescentpaw giggled in good nature. Tinyflame waved her off with a paw.

"I know, I know! But nobody really listens to that part. They just want to get to their new name!" Her sister stuck out her tongue. Then Tinyflame swiveled on her haunches, so that she was looking down at the Moonpool.

"Warrior ancestors... I, Tinyflame, call upon you to look down upon this apprentice." Tinyflame's whiskers twitched as she recited the words.

Crescentpaw zoned out the rest until the part closest to her warrior name came.

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[image]

Right before the very last part, Tinyflame turned to fix Crescentpaw with a monuments gaze.

"From this day forth, your name will be known as Crescentsky. Starclan honors your spirit and determination, and I welcome you as a full warrior of Riverclan."

The silence felt loud after that. There was no crowd of clanmates there to cheer her name. Despite this, Tinyflame stayed silent as Crescentsky thought about the change.

I didn't expect that. It's unique.

"Do you like it?" Tinyflame eventually asked.

"I love it," Crescentsky stated. Then Tinyflame cheered.

"Great! Crescentsky, Crescentsky! You deserve it." Her sister head-butted her in the shoulder, and Crescentsky playfully batted at her ear.

"Shh, not so loud. But so do you, Tinyflame. With a tongue like fire at times, the name's fitting."

Tinyflame took no offense. She gave a half-smile, her eyes glowing beside the still-water Moonpool.

"We musn't forget our warrior vigils when we arrive home." Crescentsky waved her tail as she settled next to her littermate, facing towards the slope that led away from the Moonpool.

They celebrated by sharing Tinyflame's cuckoo bird. The warriors left the mouse for Cheetah, plucking out the feathers with their teeth.

Somehow the urge to fall silent after that was natural. The two she-

cats kept a watchful eye on the eastern slope, where the forlorn wolf-scent predominately flowed from.

Crescentsky licked her jaws clean and then began grooming her fur. She wanted to run all the way home and announce for her warrior name, but there was more important tasks that needed done first.

"It's Moonhigh but that cursed cloud won't move," Tinyflame said awhile later with a scornful glare up at the obstructed crescent moon. Behind them, ferns shivered in the night breeze.

"It's drifting across it, though. Give it a moment. Finally, after this there'll be no more cloud."

The second that wispy cloud passed, the Moonpool began lightening into a brilliant radiating glow. The edges were a glimmering shade of aqua, and the claw-scratch moon was reflected in its darkest, stillest waters.

The crescent was blinding white, glistening in the surface of the pool with a distorted shape.

Tinyflame and Crescentsky met each other's gaze. Somehow this was more urethral than they had expected.

The two she-cats were lit by a soft blue light. Crescentsky nearly forgot the wolf-scent flowing down from the mountain, and Cheetah watching out for them up in her sycamore tree.

"Hurry!" Tinyflame lept to all four paws, her tail stuck straight up behind her.

"You have to touch the Moonpool now. The pathways for visiting Starclan aren't always open."

"You're not coming?" Crescentsky lifted a paw, taken aback. "I thought we were going together."

"There's no point in me coming with you. You'll need eyes behind you and on the ground, in case I have to wake you up."

"..Alright." She swallowed.

Visiting Starclan by myself seems like a big task... but the clans need help now more than ever.

What if they don't accept a visit from an ordinary warrior, though? Who was just an apprentice moments before... anxiety halted her pawsteps.

Crescentsky shook out her fur and lifted her muzzle.

It's not as if I didn't plan to come by myself in the first place. I can do this.

Hesitating no longer, she strided forward. At the edge of the Moonpool's sandy shore, she crouched. Crescentsky dipped her head lower and lower, until it tapped the Moonpool's glittery surface.

By the time the ripple of her nose-touch reached the moon-reflection in the center, she was asleep.

The black-and-white tabby was still crouched on the earth when she awoke. Within the blink of an eye she had exited one world and entered another.

Crescentsky rose on trembling haunches and gazed around. Starclan had starshine outlined in every swirling willow tree, river swell and grass-blade. White pebbles rolled beneath her paws, as she turned to look towards a chattering brook. Stones climbed a grassy hillock that was split to make way for a tiny waterfall. The glade she stood in was ringed with stringy sedge-bushes and lush reed stalks.

As the water crashed down into the flat mossy stones below, sparks of starlight seemed to fly out. Mesmerized, the Riverclan she-cat searched for Starclan warriors.

The moon was a glowing orb above them, enchanting and still. Its light illuminated a white she-cat sitting on a rocky outcrop. From across the grove, she turned glittering green eyes onto Crescentsky, who stood there observing.

"Hello," the she-cat dipped her head formerly. Crescentsky crossed the grass toward her.

The ground feels soft as cobweb, she thought admiringly. She felt as if she could have a luxurious nap, if she just laid down under the pelt of stars.

But she kept moving, until she was all the way at the foot of the she-cat's rocky mound.

"Hi..." the Riverclan warrior began awkwardly. *I don't belong here.*

The she-cat jumped down with well-aimed leap, landing directly in front of her. However, she began padding around Crescentsky, examining the she-cat's solid build.

"My name is Whiteleaf. We've been waiting for you."

Crescentsky straightened, looking around. But as far as her eye could see, there was no other cats in the starlit glade. Whiskers of grass and frosty-looking bluebells twitched, distracting her for a second. But when she looked closer, no one was there.

The air was still but not quiet. Crickets chirruped in the spindly grass stalks. She could hear a vole digging through the soft soil along the lakeshore behind her.

"I've come to ask how we restore the lost clans," the Riverclan warrior said grievously.

"We need new leaders and medicine cats. And we need to flee the territories... or whatever you think is best."

Whiteleaf's studied her, leaning close. Crescentsky held her breath while the she-cat looked close into her eyes.

"Wise questions." She seemed to be searching for something in Crescentsky's gaze.

"But we cannot give you the answer to everything you ask for."

"Why?" She opened her jaws to retaliate.

"So I came here for nothing? All hope is lost?" Her meow was despairing.

Starclan can't do anything?

"My clans need help! I need some way to *help them,"* Crescentsky's mew was a half-growl out of pure desperation.

*"*Slow down!" The she-cat explained.

"I didn't say that we can't help." Whiteleaf sat down, her eyes twinkling like tiny little stars. Her white flanks glittered like sunlit brimstone. On such a clear, lovely night, Crescentsky felt herself relaxing. She could tell that it was safe here.

"The clans have never before seen such mass tragedy, within my memory." Her voice quavered like splintered ice.

The frosty she-cat paused.

"The truth is that if we send who's left to search for new lands, enough would not survive to carry on the legacy of the clans."

"Why not send just a few cats?" Crescentsky asked, trying to sound patient.

"It is not so simple," Whiteleaf meowed. Her tone was cool but authorative.

"We've had the idea to send just a few cats. We can foresee the probabilities of that future. And it doesn't end well." Whiteleaf's voice was direct as she carried on.

"With leaf-fall encroaching, and the long leaf-bare moons coming soon after, those journeying cats would die. And the wolves would scatter who's left waiting around the lake before they had a chance to return, *if* they could."

The Riverclan cat's bones chilled. A sense of foreboding gathered in her heart, temporarily swamping her thoughts.

"And Starclan would be disconnected from the clans. We cannot

wander with you. Starclan must find hunting grounds in the skies, as well as each clan needing to find their own territory down on the earth." She sighed lamentably.

Once we leave, we wouldn't have access to Starclan until we either return or find the new territories. The realization shocked her. *Not to mention having to find a new Moonpool or some other variation, at that.*

"We have sent out cats to look from the stars, but we have not found so much as a partly suitable territory for all five clans yet."

Everything Crescentsky was hearing sounded bad.

But they're trying. Starclan has been trying *as hard as I have.* That tiny fact only brightened her optimism.

"There is a couple of other things we can do to help restore what's left of the clans," Whiteleaf rushed into saying. "But really, it will be up to all of you."

Whiteleaf's eyes sparkled with hope as she said this to Crescentsky.

"It will not be easy. The task will be tedious and challenging." The thin she-cat was leaning forward, as if she couldn't wait to get to the good news.

She really does want to help. Whiteleaf's triangular white ears pricked, and starlit speckles flung down her pelt as she moved.

"We'll start by choosing a medicine cat for Riverclan."

Crescentsky purred ecstatically, practically melting into her own fur with relief.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you, Whiteleaf. Thank you, Starclan." Crescentsky's tail was waving eagerly. There was still no other cats that she could see.

Starclan was oddly dark at night, as well as light. The moon seemed to light up the grass with an abundance of starlight, and the rippling riverbed waves were sapphire blue.

"So who's the new medicine cat going to be?"
Her eyes were full of wonder as she squinted across the shallow river-bend, where hanging ivy stems trailed between emerald, moon-lit spruce trees.

"Now, now." Whiteleaf patiently consoled her.

"It's not that simple, once again. I can't just tell you here and now," the she-cat muttered dryly, but there was amusement in her tone. Crescentsky's whiskers twitched.

"Tell your clan they will receive a sign." Whiteleaf's gaze narrowed intently, and Crescentsky blinked in understanding.

"You may receive it when least expected. But you will know when you see it." Her tone resounded with wisdom and experience.

"The chosen cat will be trained by a Starclan medicine cat in their dreams. I'm afraid we have no other way around that."

She nodded. There was so many things that the tabby she-cat wanted to say.

Whiteleaf leaned back, satisfied, but she still wasn't finished.

"Starclan's next course of action affects you and you alone."

Crescentsky felt confused, but she was smart enough not to question yet. Her gaze widened while she listened.

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[image] [image]

Reeds swished together beside the riverbeds, whispering in the light breeze. Squirrels chittered and ran between the thick silvery tree-trunks, their obscure noise a blissful rhapsody in the serene Starclan grove.

"There is something we can do for *you*, Crescentsky." Whiteleaf was very serious now. She stood rigid, pausing to stare at the warrior.

She just acknowledged my warrior name...! She knows! She saw the ceremony! Crescentsky's tail flipped with delight. Ears pricked, she regarded this with a purr.

But Whiteleaf flicked her tail in a beckoning gesture. The action suspended her words.

Is she beckoning me? But Crescentsky was already standing right in front of her.

"Starclan can give you a gift. But it is temporary." Whiteleaf went on while cats flitted from the foliage all around them.

Wait... what?

Cats lept from behind willow trees and crawled out of the scrubland. Cats swarmed over and around the waterfall, their paws kicking up a spray. Cats stomped out of hedgerows on one side of the clearing, shaking leaves from their pelts. A few mated couples and close kin even padded from shadowy shrubs, their pelts brushing and their starlight twice as bright together.

So many Starclan cats! Crescentsky breathed in amazement. She caught sight of Chaosclaw and Smallsparrow. Their heads were held high as they settled on the edge of the glade.

The other Starclan cats had hid themselves well. Or maybe they had

just now arrived. A few of the ones in the front smirked, but Crescentsky didn't mind.

Naturally, her first thought was to look for her father Everfrost. Then she searched in vain for Eveningstar, Hillflower, or Cloverkit. But there were so many different pelts; dark and pale. Lithe and broad-shouldered. Long-furred and short pelted.

"Whiteleaf, pardon me." Crescentsky focused on Whiteleaf again, ignoring the approaching crowd to address the she-cat's earlier statement.

"By a gift, did you mean that you can give me my claws back? Please give Tinyflame hers too," she added with a beg.

"No, young warrior. We cannot return your claws." A tall tom stepped up from the crowd, his features more distinguishable as he drew apart from the others.

The warrior's pelt was dark tabby with white paws. His long tufted fur was edged with a soft starlit glow, and he was half-smiling in a bittersweet kind of way.

"Everfrost!" She meowed with delight. Crescentsky didn't stop herself from bounding forward. Grit flung up under her paws as she skidded into her father's chest.

Crescentsky felt her father lick the fur between her ears. She purred as she sat with him, almost touching flanks.

"I've missed you so much. I'm sorry you died." she began, emotion threatening to swell up her throat.

"And I've... not made the best choices." The Riverclan she-cat sighed.

"I got a cat killed because of my recklessness. Maybe even two... I should've left the journey around the lake to Lagoonstripe or someone else. A cat without claws is useless for defending the clan, and that's all I've wanted to do my whole life!" Crescentsky's voice shook toward the end. She took a breath. The regret was beginning to blur her vision.

"Tinyflame and Cheetah could die on the way back. So could I," she admitted. But her words were a whisper as she spoke in fear for her companions.

"I didn't really want them to come because I can't properly protect them, or anyone else. Not like you protected me," Crescentsky admitted. Stress strained her voice, and her tone grew stronger and more ashamed.

Everfrost was silent as she finished her rambling. And then he said "Yet you keep trying," his voice soft and sympathetic.

"Because I just-... I can't give up. I don't *want* to give up." Her voice was strained as she looked toward the sparkling grass in front of her paws.

"I don't wanna lose my clan." A few of the Starclan cats sitting close by pricked their ears, listening with a sympathetic gaze.

"I named myself a warrior despite my missing claws! A-and I know that's wrong." She flattened her ears as she glanced at them, her heart bleeding.

"Crescentsky, never stop being who you are. Claws or not, your spirit will get you there. As long as you don't give up you can prosper. You can grow and learn and adjust. You can accomplish what you want to. What you *need* to." He touched his nose to hers, but the Riverclan she-cat drew back.

"How?"

"I've seen your determination. You don't need claws to get you there. And we will help you." Everfrost had a twinkle in his eye as he sat beside her.

Crescentsky felt so many watchful eyes on her that she felt that her father's praise was growing awkward. She took a step away.

"If you aren't giving us our claws back then what did you mean, Whiteleaf?" Her tabby head swiveled as she looked for the she-cat.

"When you said a gift?" Crescentsky peered around a calico she-cat's

haunches, finally catching sight of Whiteleaf's starlit pelt.

Whiteleaf blinked at her calmly. She was laying in the soft grass now, with a hindpaw stretched out so she could groom it.

Instead of answering her, Whiteleaf abandoned her grooming and strode across the crowded glade. A tiny black and-white she-kit ran up from beside the waterfall where she had been playing. They joined together with their tails lifted, heading straight for her.

"Cloverkit!" Crescentsky gasped. Everfrost stepped back into the crowd, his gaze proud.

"It's Cloverpaw now." The black-and-white Skyclan kit was gazing at Crescentsky with big, endearing green eyes. They were the color of a dappled alder leaf.

She got her apprentice name in Starclan. Remorse swelled in Crescentsky's heart.

"I'm so sorry, Cloverpaw. It was my fault. I know I should've stayed with you. I should've escorted you to the maple tree myself. If I had-"

"Save it." Cloverpaw shook her head. Her open face displayed no grudge as she looked up at Crescentsky.

"You and I both know it isn't your fault. What could have happened and what should have happened doesn't matter now. So don't hold it against yourself. Just do what you can to save the clans. Save my brother and my mom, if you're able to." Her eyes gleamed as she looked up at Crescentsky with eyes full of hope.

She still looks at me with admiration. After everything.

The Riverclan warrior dipped her head. "Thank you. I'll do all I can. And I hope you find your Starclan apprentice training fun." Crescentsky's eyes brimmed with compersion as she straightened.

She saw a pale brown-tabby she-cat prance closer from the edge of the glowing glade. She was pretty sure it was Hillflower, but she couldn't make sure because Cloverpaw spoke up again, distracting

her.

"I do. But you must save them with this gift." Crescentsky's gaze turned incredulous, and she did a double take. Cloverpaw's tone had just flipped faster than a live fish on dry land.

Behind her, Whiteleaf watched intently. The other Starclan cats all paused in their mingling and turned their heads, ears pricked. As if they were expecting something to happen.

Whiteleaf spoke up, her gaze booming so that all cats in the river-copse could hear. Cats crouched under bramble-thickets and fern fronds leaned forward, their eyes on Crescentsky and Cloverpaw.

"Listen to these words and heed them. All of Starclan's spirits now hear and approve of this choice."

"Though Starclan cannot restore your lost claws, we give you the power to use teeth against itself." Cloverpaw's gaze grew so narrow and intense that Crescentsky almost took a pace back.

"Use the jaws that took my life," the black-and-white apprentice said.

Cloverpaw strode forward while an orange tabby nudged Crescentsky's haunches from behind. Confused, she stumbled.

"Is that a prophecy? And uh, what am I supposed to do?"

Most of the Starclan cats had settled in a ring around them, quiet and watchful. None of them answered.

"Nose-touch with me," Cloverpaw whispered.

"Wait, but- isn't that how cats become a leader?"

I can't become a leader! Not yet! What is happening!?

"Starclan can't return your claws. But they can give you the wolves claws." Hillflower's soft voice insisted from the watching crowd.

"Hillflower, you too? What does that even mean?!" Crescentsky was

growing
frustrated. She couldn't even catch sight of Hillflower from the mix of standing and sitting cats in the crowded glade. Just then the stranger tabby behind her nudged her haunches again.

"Hurry. Time is running out."

"...Okay," she breathed, finally admitting defeat. *Starclan cats are super weird*. Their obscurity was disarming.

Crescentsky leaned forward to touch her nose with Cloverpaw's. She braced herself, expecting pain. But instead a heightened sense of adrenaline filled her. She felt as if her paws were flying across the earth, faster than they had ever taken her before. Wind was rushing through her pelt. Her senses were heightened, like she was seeing every reed and stone more clearly, something she hadn't known was possible.

She stepped back quickly, overwhelmed by the feeling.

The effect was already gone, though. Some kind of brilliant white light had flashed in front of Crescentsky's closed eyes, causing her to open them and flutter her lids. The light dimmed and then died on the edge of her nose, where Cloverpaw had touched it.

What was that?

"It is done." Cloverpaw stepped back, looking all wise and intelligent and like she already knew everything.

"What did that even do? What 'gift' did you give me?" Crescentsky meowed as the world began lightening around her. She watched the cat's outlines start to blend with the background. The grass was turning white-washed and misty alongside their pelts.

"No, wait!" She snapped before the light englufed her.

Did they just give me an extra life? Different claws than I had before? Or some kind of extra strength? I have way more questions!

But Crescentsky could feel herself waking up. Her paws were being pulled towards something even though she wasn't moving.

The last thing the Riverclan warrior saw was Cloverpaw's viridescent gaze, as she turned in a frantic circle from the spot she was in.

"Don't forget to watch for the medicine cat sign." The black-and-white she-cat said, her green eyes floating there ghostily.

"Travel safely, Crescentsky." Whiteleaf's voice was warm as she cut in to speak the parting words. At this point Crescentsky couldn't see anything but her own paws and chest-fur.

"Our blessings go with you."

Fun fact: Cloverpaw is being trained in Starclan by the previous Skyclan leader

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[image]

"Crescentsky! Crescentsky!"

"S-what?" It was difficult to drag herself out of sleep. Crescentsky felt the cold air touch her flanks as she was hoisted up and then shaken.

"Oof, she's *so* heavy! I'm sorry, sister. But we have to go *now*." Tinyflame said, meowing in her face as she blinked sleep from her eyes.

"Cheetah saw wolves heading this way, and there's a lot of them!"

Crescentsky's senses sharpened as she shook off the Starclan dream. She stood up on her own four paws.

"Are you guys ready? Let's go." Cheetah meowed urgently from beneath some entwined brambles. As she sat crouched there, shadow swamped her pelt, and her golden eyes could barely be seen.

"Yes. Come on, Crescentsky. You'll have to tell us what you saw later." Tinyflame lowered her head, striding into a quick stalk beside the most well-protected undergrowth.

"The Moonpool's vegetation ends down there." Crescentsky took the lead as they came to the foothill of a rocky descent that led them away from the stream.

"We'll have to skirt the valley and then cross Windclan's hills, since we don't have claws."

She took a reassuring breath, steadying herself. All three cats studied the soft earth where they would land when they jumped down.

"Tinyflame, stay close to me. Cheetah, I think it's best that you

backtrack and climb that hawthorn tree." The tree was still within viewing-sight of them. It had a giant leafy crest, dark and full of long lanky branches. They had skirted it on their departure from the Moonpool. Though its main trunk was bent at an angle, the tree's topmost branches nearly scraped the dim-lit night sky.

"There's no possible way they can reach you up there." Crescentsky aimed her mew over her shoulder as she paced rapidly across the terrain.

She had expected the she-cat to nod and head off obediently, but instead Cheetah replied;

"I'm not climbing a tree without you. We'll end up separated. I'm staying," the spotted she-cat insisted.

Crescentsky didn't have time to argue. She tried to supress her worry. The canine odor was fresh on the wind now. It seemed to carry in billows from upwind.

They're close. Somehow she knew they were being followed.

"Where do we even go? They'll track us down!" Tinyflame yowled with distress.

The three she-cats crossed the last stretch of scant undergrowth. Beyond this, there wasn't much cover between them and the Horseplace.

"Head straight for the Thunderclan-Windclan stream," Crescentsky ordered. "That might be our only chance at breaking the scent trail and escaping."

"Won't they just follow us across the stream, if it's shallow enough?" Tinyflame looked dubious. Her chest expanded and fell as she took frantic breaths.

"Just trust me!" Crescentsky snapped impatiently. She kept her gaze forward.

I hope Cheetah had swimming lessons while I was gone. The tabby-and-white she-cat swallowed, tense as she studied the open path that

they were about to take.

"As soon as we run they're going to see us. They're somewhere behind us." Tinyflame's meow was petrified. Her ears were so flat against her head that it looked like she didn't have any.

Unfortunately, Crescentsky didn't have time for consoling her. But she crouched with her muzzle close to her sisters, and laid her tail on her shoulder in preparation for the release call.

"Wait..."

Silence filled the air. After a few heartbeats, she heard the sound of a large muzzle snuffling close behind them.

"Run *now*!" Crescentsky's shriek of panic was jarring. She lifted her tail from Tinyflame's back in one fluid movement. Her paws worked beneath her, tail streaming behind, ears flat to blot out the wind.

Tinyflame's chest was heaving. The she-cat launched herself into a frantic sprint. She hurled across the moonlit grass desperately, paws flicking out like a rabbits. Crescentsky's heart skipped a beat as she heard pawsteps thumping against the ground behind them.

"Don't look back," she gasped in-between breaths at her companions.

Their instinct had been right. There was indeed wolves behind them, but until they looked they wouldn't know how many.

A frustrated yip rang out across the plain. It pierced their ears and pushed their paws faster, so that Crescentsky could barely breathe for the effort.

A glowing quarter moon clung to the inky sky above, as shadows stretched more than twice their length across the denticulated grass.

By the time they made it to the stream her paws were shaking. They struck the ground with echoes of pain, and her companions didn't seem any better off. Cheetah was lagging behind them, a wince in her step as she struggled to keep going.

Tinyflame saw Cheetah's condition as well, and made a straight streamline for the Windclan stream. Right before her sister lept to the other side, Crescentsky yowled.

"Not there!" The dark tabby-and-white she-cat pointed her tail farther downstream.

"We can't fight against the stronger current, Crescentsky. We could drown!"

Tinyflame veered from the bank where she had been braced to jump. It was swollen from the storm a couple of days ago, but nowhere near fast enough to sweep a wolf off its paws.

"The wolves will just follow us across if we don't. They can leap this part of the stream easier than we can swim it," the tabby warrior insisted. Crescentsky didn't bother to wait. She turned tail and dashed down the bank.

Water slipped over stone and foamed along the edges. It reflected the dropping moon, as it made way for the fiery rising sun that would soon befell them.

A string of wolves was approaching the muddy riverbend where Cheetah and Tinyflame had just fled. They had their heads lifted. But then all of them paused, shoulders flexed and heads dipped as they bent to sniff along the grass. Adjusting their course, the wolves loped into a barreling head-long run.

The knot of them seemed to move like one creature until they spread out from one another, one positioned just ahead of the other.

There's five of them! What in Starclan..? Crescentsky couldn't recall ever seeing so many at once. Their lanky legs strode across the earth rapidly, moving underneath the moonlight with a hunter's ease.

We have no chance. We'd be killed instantly in a fight against five wolves. Her heart plummeted in her chest.

Unless we do this!

As soon as Crescentsky reached the most dangerous fast-flowing water she lept for its center. Just before she hit the surface she saw Tinyflame's eyes widen with shock, as she watched her sister drop into the waves.

Then the she-cat's legs jerked into a frantic leap, as she hurdled off the edge as well.

Cheetah fell from the inclined shoreline and into the churning water after her, not watching where she was putting her paws on the dark and murky bank. Her head had been swiveled to look at the wolves following behind her.

As Crescentsky was tugged ahead of them atop the frothy surface, she lost sight of her companions. She felt slippery rocks scrape against her haunches.

She span in a circle rapidly, her paws twisting beneath her. Her thick pelt was weighing her down. Despite this, her back paws were doing most of the work, as she fought to keep herself right-sight-up against the crashing water.

A stone cut into her right hock so hard that she gritted her teeth. Then she felt her forelegs dragging over some uneven river-rock. She tried to stick her paws in-between the stones for purchase, but the current only wrenched them out again.

Will Tinyflame make it? And Cheetah? She couldn't say any words aloud. It was a struggle to keep her jaws out of the water. Her front end kept wanting to sink and hit the serrated stones, and her hind legs were weakening.

How much longer can I keep myself afloat?

Water kept pouring into her mouth as waves battered her. Her sense were all but gone. She couldn't hear anything but the rushing stream. She couldn't see anything but frothing, splashing waves.

She felt herself shivering, exerting more energy than before. Her tail was a plume of soaked fur being tugged through the water behind her. There was no sign of Cheetah, Tinyflame *or* the wolves..

Then Crescentsky saw something outlined dark and craggy up ahead of her. It was jutting far out into the center of the river. The Riverclan warrior knew she only had one chance to grab it.

She kicked her hind paws and reached for the mossy surface. A fallen tree that had uprooted and tipped over in the water. However, her missing claws found no purchase, and she slipped away from it.

Crescentsky had no choice but to keep swimming, churning her paws to stay above the stream's surface.

At least the water is a little bit calmer here. Maybe I could drag myself to the edge and crawl out.

But at this point, she knew she wouldn't last much longer. Her shoulders sank under, and her breathing was ragged and uneven. Crescentsky was simply too fatigued.

If there was some cat there, she felt certain that they would've heard her gasping for air. The Riverclan she-cat swam agonizingly closer to the shallower water, but then she accidentally took a mouthful of it and began coughing. Her legs jerked out feebly.

She fought to stay upright, but her lungs were contorting in protest. Ingesting the water had caused her to gasp and splutter, and now she was taking in even more of it; dropping below the surface like a stone.

Her legs kicked in a last desperate attempt, but there was no saving herself now. Crescentsky was about to hit the bottom, and even now the current was shoving her along.

Then she heard a giant splash close to her head. Someone grabbed her by the scruff and began towing her through the clutching waves. Crescentsky saw her white paws dragging limply through the current, as she fought not to take in more water.

She gasped with relief when they surfaced. Her eyes were bulging out of her head, her sodden fur streaming.

It wasn't Tinyflame or Cheetah, she realized when they reached the shore. It was a large black-and-silver tom with a white muzzle and paws, his whiskers dripping as he dragged them both out with difficulty. Even after they had reached the edge, the tom still kept ahold of Crescentsky.

Mud was working its way into her fur. "I can climb the bank on my own!" She snapped at the stranger ungratefully. Crescentsky kicked free of him and retched up some of the water in her lungs, then stifled a sigh at the state of her pelt.

"Sorry," he said breathlessly. Crescentsky's flanks were also heaving. "I was just trying to help. You were half-drowned by the time I found you. I heard some cat struggling as I was traveling upshore." His yellow eyes were concerned.

Her hindpaws were trembling, and she was fighting to hide it. Crescentsky's eyes were half-closed to avoid the water streaming off her face.

"Thanks." She grumbled, soothing herself with a lick. Her breath rattled as she fought to catch her breath.

"Wow..." the tufty-furred tom stepped in front of her as if trying to catch her gaze.

"Your eyes are beautiful." His thick tail waved composedly. "I've never seen a cat's eyes be two different colors."

"Yeah, a lot of cats haven't." She was used to dealing with this since she'd been a kit. Crescentsky flicked water off her paws and into the grass.

"I think I remember you from a gathering. Not seeing you, but cats talking about how you were the first in generations to have different colored eyes."

The tabby-and-white Riverclan warrior was already growing impatient. She had to find her clanmates.

"Who are you, anyway?" Crescentsky took deep breaths, trying to control the sting of river-water searing her throat.

The tom didn't have any particular scent on him. In fact, he smelled liked a loner. Peaty heather and unknown wild-grasses were laced within his sharp, waterlogged scent.

Despite this, Crescentsky felt like she ought to remember him. She'd seen that same arching slope to his shoulders somewhere, and those same huge, triangular ears with bushy tips.

"I'm Nighthowl. I'm formerly Shadowclan."

52 ☽ Part 2

[image]

THIS IS THE START OF PART TWO

Part 2 will be shorter than the initial Part One of 52 chapters. Expect the book to end soon.

▼ THE STORY IS CONTINUED BELOW ▼

"You're Darkflower's kin." Nighthowl nodded.

"If you're Shadowclan, then how did you swim like a Riverclan cat?" She looked over at him suspiciously.

The broad-shouldered tom licked a paw and drew it across his ear. As he did, Crescentsky saw a jagged scar catch the moonlight. It was hidden beneath the thin layer of grey-black fur close to one of his eyes.

"I don't live in the clans anymore. I've had to adapt to new types of terrain and use new hunting techniques." His yellow gaze was clear. "Including fishing and swimming in times of scarce prey."

"Then what are you doing out here?" Crescentsky scented the wind and looked around quickly. "There was just wolves on the other side of the stream. That's why we jumped in."

"We?" He looked confused.

"My sister and clanmate. They're somewhere around here."

I hope. Crescentsky tried to explain.

"We're Riverclan. We still live in our camp. I lost them when we jumped into the stream...

But last I heard Shadowclan's leader was gone and Darkflower, your deputy, had abandoned any hope she'd had left. So how did you get all the way out here?" she repeated.

"Oh. I was trying to visit Darkflower. But she's gone..." the tom blinked forlornly.

"She said she was going to look for you. I visited her in the Shadowclan camp just under a quarter moon ago." Her tail swished as she said so, but then Crescentsky paused.

"After she... when- IF..."

This is gonna be hard to explain. The Riverclan she-cat bit her tongue.

Darkflower was either dead alongside Plumetail, or out beyond the territories searching for her son.

"When I arrived at the Shadowclan camp there was no cat there," Nighthowl said. "Just old burial mounds outside the bramble barrier." His tail fell still as he elaborated. The tom looked disturbed.

"So now I'm just going back to the foot of the mountains. I'll try to find her again later."

"Why go there?" Crescentsky asked curiously, and the tom's eyes widened with matched interest.

"Thats where me, Wolfpaw and Velvetpaw live."

She stilled, crestfallen. *I should've known there would only be a few cats left.*

"Disappointed? Well, it's okay." He rolled his shoulders and spoke reassuringly.

"I've been looking for a she-cat around my age to join me. And you're a real pretty one." His eyes slid towards her. "Velvetpaw and Wolfpaw stay out of my fur, if that's what you're wondering. They're less like troublesome 'paws and more like withdrawn campmates, now that they've surpassed warrior age."

Crescentsky wrinkled her nose, taking a step back to where she had been before.

Was that his invitation to go off gallivanting with a stranger, without a care in the world for the clans?

Her fur was beginning to dry since she had not yet shaken the water out. She hadn't wanted to shake droplets all over the stranger, but now she wished that she had.

"Are you for real?" She asked, but the tom's anticipating expression didn't change.

"Uh, no thanks." Crescentsky looked away.

"I have to get back to Riverclan. In fact, I was wondering if you'd come to represent what's left of Shadowclan. We're trying to preserve and rebuild what's left of the clans under Starclan's guidance. I've just visited the Moonpool, as I said before." She made sure not to overshare on that last part. If the Shadowclan tom wanted to join them on their return travels, then Crescentsky might share more.

His reply was smooth, his damp fur unruffled.

"Aww, cute. But the clans are irredeemable, no matter what Starclan says." Nighthowl leaned forward, his eyes pitiful.

"You can't restore a dead dream. A few warriors and apprentices aren't going to be enough to restore the clans to what they once were. That's why I left." He lifted his tail, but even so, still sighed with disappointment. The shaggy tom threw a glance back at her as he retreated, *tsk*ing.

"Follow me if you want to. I won't mind, uh... what's your name?" he winked back at her.

Crescentsky cringed at his insolence, then shouted at his retreating hindquarters "It's Crescentsky! And no, how about *you* bring yourself and those apprentices back to Riverclan's territory? The more cats we have, the better we can defend ourselves while we rebuild our strength before leaf-bare! A true warrior would fight for

their clan!" She added, feeling rebellious even more so now that she had named herself a warrior.

But the tomcat kept strutting along until his tail flicked out of sight. His dark pelt could be seen through the bulrush stems, and then was gone.

Crescentsky turned around, searching the dingy skies. Dawn wasn't far off, and her paws stung. With a pelt as heavy as stones, she felt it in her best interest to stop and rest, and groom herself.

But she knew she couldn't. She had to find the others, and so she set off beside the mucky riverpath.

Her hind-legs were trembling with exhaustion. If a wolf came and she had to leap back into the river, she would surely drown. With despair wallowing in the pits of her belly, she padded on.

"Crescentskyyyyy!"

Crescentsky pricked her ears as she heard her companions calling. Relief loosened her shoulders, and she could step lighter. She broke into a flat-out run on lurching pawsteps.

They're alive!

She could see them up the riverbank. When she reached them, Cheetah pounced on her and bowled her over, so that Crescentsky had to push her off while laughing before she could greet Tinyflame.

"Thank Starclan you're okay. It seems we've thrown off their scent," Tinyflame was panting and out of breath.

"Cheetah pulled me out when we were swept into a shoreline. Lagoonstripe already taught her how to swim well. I don't know how she had the energy to do it." Tinyflame's ears were flat, but then she lifted them and began laughing hysterically.

"I was sure that one of us would die!" The she-cat curled her tail in thankful amusement, then bumped her hip against Cheetah's.

"Thanks again, Cheetah. If you ask me, you should've been named a Riverclan apprentice by now." Tinyflame sat down wearily, her amusement fading.

Cheetah looked no worse for wear. Clearly, she took it as a compliment.

"Maybe soon!" She grinned. "It would be great to become a full member of Riverclan."

The three she-cats looked at one another for a moment, then turned around to scent the wind and listen to their surroundings. Crescentsky was just thinking on whether to tell them about Nighthowl when Cheetah spoke up again.

"Oh, sorry Crescentsky. There's some grass stuck to your flanks from where I pounced on you." Cheetah moved to brush it off with her paw, but Crescentsky instead braced to shake herself off.

"We need to get going. I just needed a sit-down," Tinyflame sighed while a spray of grass flew off Crescentsky's flanks. The tabby she-cat closed her eyes to avoid it getting into her eyes.

Cheetah randomly gasped, while Crescentsky opened her eyes and looked around.

"Crescent-..." she didn't finish her sentence. She seemed too stunned to do so.

All of a sudden, it felt as if the ground was farther below her. She peered at Tinyflame, who was somehow a good cat-length shorter than her now.

Why does she look so much smaller? Beside the damp riverbank foliage, Crescentsky's perspective had somehow completely changed.

"So what did Starclan say about appointing new leaders for the other four clans?" Tinyflame asked while grooming an outstretched forepaw, her black pelt indistinguishable in the dim-light. She made a face at the muck stuck to her hind-legs and then stood up to leave.

Disoriented, Crescentsky lifted one foreleg. It somehow felt longer than before.

Cheetah's eyes were bigger than they had ever been. The she-cat studied her with her neck stretched out and hackles fluffed. Her friend's nostrils flared as she tried to catch the scent of something.

"Surely not..." Cheetah whispered, almost to herself.

Tinyflame was in turn studying Cheetah; who stood partway in front of her. The direction that Tinyflame still faced put her looking away from Crescentsky.

Then the lithe black she-cat glanced over her shoulder, following Cheetah's gaze. Her eyes lit up with astonishment upon seeing her kin. Her hiss was long and drawn-out. Tinyflame's fur fluffed, and she took a massive side-step to flank Cheetah.

The two she-cats stood there with a stunned stature, their legs flexed as if tensed to run.

"Crescentsky, where are you?" Tinyflame called timidly, her voice laden with fear.

What's going on? Why were they asking where she was, when she was standing right in front of them?

Then Crescentsky looked down at her chest-fur and forelegs.

She was larger, with longer limbs. And her fur had changed color.

Nothing looked the same under the scant covering of moonlight, blanched by thin wispy cloud. Nothing *felt* the same. The scents on the air were sharper and more odorous, her skull felt heavier, her eyesight more defined.

And there it was again, the heavy scent of canine filling her nostrils. Tinyflame choked back a mewl of fear, her flanks quavering.

Confused, she turned around, her paws feeling heavy and clumsy. But there was no one there. The moonlight showed a flat expanse of overgrown wildgrasses waving in the wind. The gently sloping land

led over into the abundant greenery of Thunderclan territory.

"What happened?" Crescentsky said, but even her voice didn't sound the same. Tinyflame and Cheetah flinched when she'd said it.

Something is very wrong.

53

[image][image]

They look scared of me. The two she-cats had begun to whisper quietly, never taking their nervous eyes off of Crescentsky.

"Go look at your reflection in the water. If that even *is* you. I don't believe that it is." Tinyflame's meow came out in a frightened jitter. The corners of her jaw stretched down and into a deep, appalling frown.

"Of course it is," Cheetah murmured back. For once she was serious, but there was also admiration in her tone.

"It has the same colored eyes as her. Oh wow, I never thought Starclan was capable of things like this. This is awesome!" For all of the confidence in Cheetah's tone, the spotted she-cat still had a ridge of fur lifted along her spine.

It? Fear trickled like snowmelt down her spine.

"Yeah, sure, awesome." Tinyflame's retort was dry, and she rolled her eyes. Then she glanced at Crescentsky and her eyes widened again.

"I don't believe this. It's too dangerous. It can't be real...!" The smaller she-cat's words were tremulous.

Crescentsky was scared to speak again, in case her voice came out in that deep, guttural tone like it had before.

If that *was* her voice.

But it had to be. She had meant to say it.

She padded over to the stream's edge where the water was calmest. Towards its middle the channel swirled in eddys around partly-submerged rocks.

Tinyflame's odd words had frightened her. She almost didn't want to look.

But she dropped her head lower anyways in order to study her reflection. Because it was still dark, it took her a moment to understand what she was seeing. Crescentsky didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't anything as profound as this.

The eyes staring back at her were pinpointed and small. They had perfectly round, dilated pupils in order to absorb the moons minimal light. And the irises were her's; one blue-flecked and another yellow. But the fur that stretched across her face was not hers. Nor was the pelt that covered her shoulders, her forelegs, and her flanks.

What she could see of herself was vast and dark, shaggy and dense. Stockier than a cat. As she turned her face to the side, her muzzle seemed to elongate to twice as long as that of a cat's. When she moved, her reflection wavered along with the surface of the water, but did not change.

She was *huge*. Crescentsky looked down at her compact paws, which were leaving deep gauges in the earth.

And she *did* have claws; but they were in-retractable and blunt. They couldn't tear through an animal's hide like a cat's could.

But my teeth can.

An uncanny shiver ran down her spine and all the way to her tail. Her head began to buzz, as Crescentsky could scarcely believe it.

She ran her lips along her elongated muzzle. It felt weird. Her snout

was pointed rather than dainty and round. It felt like there was too many teeth in her mouth, and they were all too sharp for her too-long tongue.

How did this happen? When *did this happen?* She stopped looking at the wolf's appearance and stepped back, intending to question her clanmates.

But now that she knew for certain what she was, everything felt more unnatural. Her paws were stiff-legged as they stepped across the earth. Her tail felt raggedy behind her, thicker and less versatile than her long cat's tail had been. And the sheer size-difference she felt looking over at her companions alone...

"Help me change back," Crescentsky's words came out as a growl instead of a mew. Her forepaws stepped disorderly, so she stopped walking and stood still. The treetops felt closer to her eartips than they ever had before. As she glanced up, the experience unsettled her.

Can they understand me?

Everything about this unnerved her. Was this truly Starclan's doing? It had to be.

They'd said they'd give her the wolf's claws. And so they had, literally.

But it made no sense! Why would Starclan do this to her? Turning her into her worst enemy?

What if she was stuck like this?

All of a sudden Crescentsky wanted to be back in her cat body. She nearly opened her jaws to mewl with distress. But then she remembered the harsh wolfish voice would come out again.

She gazed around aimlessly. There was nothing here to turn her back into a cat, no plant she could eat or Starclan spirit she could ask. When her companions began trying to console her, she didn't listen.

Then she realized. *Turn me into my worst enemy...!*

I could protect the clans like this. The thought doted on her. Her eyes flitted over her weird, pointed snout and elongated forelegs, then the thick ruff of fur along her neck and back.

"Crescentsky! It's okay." Her littermate broke into her thoughts while sounding like it very much wasn't.

There was terror in Tinyflame's voice, her gaze uneasy as she peered over Cheetah's curved back toward her *now-a-wolf* sister.

"We'll figure out how to turn you back. Just don't go all wolf-brained and attack us! *Please*," she asked, poising herself to run.

"I saw what happened." Cheetah spoke up, her tail waving. She took a step closer to Crescentsky.
"Whenever you shook that debris out of your fur, you turned into a wolf." Cheetah let that sink in for a moment, then swept on.

"It was almost instant. If I had blinked I would've missed it. Crescentsky, your pelt grew out. Your face grew bigger and longer, and you grew taller in the span of a tail-flick. That's the only details I could make out because of how fast it was, and it happened while you shook your pelt. I'm *sure* of it." Cheetah's hackles began to lower, and she grew more certain of herself while she explained.

Tinyflame looked skeptical, not moving from her place several fox-lengths away.

"I know what I saw!" Cheetah meowed stubbornly.

Crescentsky's muzzle was sealed. She didn't want to speak in that oddly grating wolfish voice, no way.

But I need to tell them about Starclan's gift. This has to be connected in some way, if not the gift that they spoke of. She hadn't had the chance to yet, not after being chased into a river and then dealing with this.

"We've got to be certain of something like this. It's dangerous. She could turn on us when she's in the mind of that wolf." Tinyflame's

words were accusatory, her paws planted so firmly that Crescentsky knew if she moved, it would only be to turn and flee.

Cheetah rolled her eyes toward the star-speckled sky. "It's *her!* The wolf literally has the same shades of Crescentsky's dark tabby pelt."

Crescentsky looked over her shoulder in order to see for herself.

Cheetah was right. There was a mix of guard hairs and undercoat along her back, neck, and face the exact same color of deep blue-black and grey. Her undercoat, which was more visible and lighter along her legs, underbelly and chest, was a lighter coal-grey that shimmered silver when it caught the light.

"Before we keep talking, Crescentsky, shake out your pelt. We can test whether that's the on or off switch at the same time as making sure it's still you," Tinyflame insisted.

Crescentsky immediately did as she was told. She hadn't moved from her standing position across from them. She had still been too freaked out by the change.

While she shook out her fur, the two other she-cats watched from a safe distance. Even Cheetah didn't come closer until Crescentsky was finished, and back in her normal pelt.

She had felt nothing but the wind lifting her fur during the change, and that was normal for the pelt-shaking action. Her eyesight was distorted from witnessing the height difference, because shaking out her fur caused the world to blur around her.

And yet the after-effect was disorienting. Only a moment ago her ears had been the same height as the topmost of a large rowan bush, her skull pushing larger than a cat's body.

"It worked! See, Tinyflame?" Cheetah meowed enthusiastically.

Tinyflame was shaking her head in disbelief. The terror didn't leave her eyes even after Crescentsky sat down, looking at her paws.

"She just like, shrank down to less than half that wolf's size right in front of me."

"Yeah. That was really strange," Cheetah agreed. Crescentsky licked her chest-fur for self-reassurance, thankful for the normalcy of being close to the ground.

"There's no way Starclan gave her the ability to turn into a wolf at the shake of a pelt. *No way*," Tinyflame shook her head as if she refused to believe it still.

"That's unimaginably reckless and dangerous."

"Imagine if it had happened to you." Crescentsky frowned, still put off by what she had just experienced.

"Hey, what if it *could* happen to me? I'm going to try it." Cheetah shook out her short pelt under the lightening pre-dawn sky. However, she stayed the same golden-spotted she-cat that she was.

"What exactly did Starclan tell you?" Tinyflame looked at her sister incredulously before finally approaching.

"Let's go. I'll tell you on the way," she replied to Tinyflame and turned her muzzle in the direction of home.

Crescentsky and her companions ambled toward the lakeshore, taking the sandy path southbound that would lead back towards Riverclan. The sky was glowing beige-and-pink with pre-dawn streaks. An opaque moon sat at the very edge of the horizon, ready to dip behind a swell and make way for the adjacent sun.

While they talked and walked, Crescentsky couldn't help but think about her newfound "gift," although that's not what she felt comfortable calling it yet. Many different feelings struck her, including disbelief at what she had just experienced.

Despite this, how truly monumental this was hadn't gone unregarded by her. The Riverclan she-cat's paws were tingling from the experience. Crescentsky felt adrenaline where sore muscles had previously been.

Could she really shake her fur out, and at any moment turn into a wolf?

Well, they did *say it was temporary.... Whatever that means.* But the tabby she-cat knew that she would find out eventually.

Still, this can't be real!

And yet it is, her inner voice responded back immediately.

She couldn't wait to try the switch again already. She almost wanted to do it now, but it would freak Tinyflame out.

Crescentsky kept most of these thoughts to herself, trying to focus on informing her companions about Starclan's visit. Now that they had witnessed what happened, she couldn't help but tell them every little detail.

At the very end Tinyflame frowned. "They didn't really give us any solid answers or advice. Besides 'don't find new territories just yet.'"

"But if they plan to communicate with Riverclan's new medicine cat through Starclan dreams, then it seems certain we'll hear more from them in the near future." Cheetah blinked at her, and Tinyflame fell silent.

"So did you understand me when I spoke?" Crescentsky asked after it was clear that they had finished speaking.

"It was so..."

"Raspy? Yeah. It was like you were growling while you said it. You spoke our language through the throat of that wolf." Tinyflame began to look nervous again. Crescentsky thought she wanted to step away after she glanced sidelong, but her sister stayed beside her.

At least they could understand me. She thought that was a positive thing, if any. It would help her clanmates to believe it.

But then that got her thinking on exactly how to tell them.

Author's Tip: See concept art of Crescentsky's wolf done by me on the Art Page! (Located at the very bottom beneath spoiler warning)

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[image]

"So when are we telling the clan about this?" Tinyflame directed the question into her ear with a low murmur. Cheetah pricked hers to listen.

"We'll wait quarter moon, maybe... at least a few days." It was all she could come up with, since she couldn't safely assume that *every* cat would accept the power.

"Why?" Cheetah probed, her golden gaze curious. "Won't they have no choice not to argue, since it was Starclan's endowment and not yours?"

"Some cats still aren't going to like it, at first..." Crescentsky trailed off uncertainly. "Not that I care. It'll just give me time to figure out how to use this. Defend the camp with this power, I mean. I need to see what it's capable of. What I can do, what I can't, and how I can handle it." She kept her voice low, since they were already well beyond Riverclan's scent-line.

She hoped it was the right decision. After all, they knew almost nothing. What if Tinyflame was onto something earlier, and she'd had a point? Could the wolf's brain really alter her intellect if she was in its body for long enough?

Will I stay myself?

She had to find out the answers to those questions before she told the clan.

"There's too much we don't know yet. When they start asking us questions about this, we won't have any solid answers." Crescentsky padded along with her shoulders hunched. Each time she took a step, pain radiated through her limbs all the way to the ends of her paws.

Cheetah nodded, agreeing.

"And it could make you look like liars if you don't. Or just not experienced enough to handle the gift." She seemed to understand Crescentsky's choice now.

Tinyflame inclined her head and glanced at them. She hadn't expected that much of an insightful response from Cheetah.

"Makes sense. But it's going to be hard, trying to keep two secrets at once." The lithe black she-cat shuffled along on weary pawsteps.

"Cheetah, make sure to keep your blabbing on the down-low. And that means don't mention anything about our missing claws, *or* Crescentsky's...-" Tinyflame seemed at a loss for words.

"-ability."

"I haven't. And I won't!" Cheetah nodded seriously. The spotted fur along her back was amber-yellow with the pre-dawn wash of light. The topmost the tree-branches held twittering birds and flitting insects, but it was still relatively drab on most of Riverclan's forest ground below.

Are we going to take the lie about our missing claws to our graves? It didn't feel right, keeping Cheetah in their lies for so long, and so often.

But she couldn't see any alternative. *If we tell the clan, that could throw a standstill into things. They already think I'm dishonest for sneaking off all the time.*

Then Crescentsky half-wondered if it would be better to tell them the whole truth at one time, like ripping a burr from one's pelt. But it would surely cause more drama, and therefore more of a reaction.

The warrior stifled a sigh. They were mere fox-lengths from the Riverclan camp now. Crescentsky knew she'd be pestered with questions that she could only give half-truths to. It was kind of her own fault, though, and she knew that.

After they made it to camp, they slipped past Lagoonstripe on

guard. The silver tabby she-cat was fuming, her pinned ears making her head look flatter than a fishes.

"Crescentpaw!" Her voice boomed. "Stop right there at once! I have the nerve to claw your ears off!"

"Sorry, sorry." Crescentsky felt harassed as the warrior chewed her out. She lowered her head, avoiding Lagoonstripe's condemning gaze as the she-cat's tail lashed through the air.

"Really, Crescentpaw? *Really*? Right after I told you to warn some cat!" Her tone grew incredulous.

"Right after I told you that you could *die* without any cat ever finding you. All of you could have!" Her hackles was high as she lectured them.

Sheepishly, Crescentsky ducked her head beside the camp exit even further. Cats inside of their dens were waking up and emerging, their eyes bleary and their pelts ruffled from sleep. Houndspots was the last to emerge from the warriors den, taking tiny steps as if he were still in pain.

"I should postpone your mock-assesment!" Lagoonstripe's voice raised into yowling again.

Why would you even bother in the first place? She wanted to challenge. *A mock assesment would've led to nowhere at a time like this.* But the Riverclan warrior knew she ought to keep her mouth shut.

"We didn't *need* you on the Starclan quest. We needed you here, being an apprentice. Hunting and dragging out old nests, assisting in the dawn patrols and training beside your peers. You-"

Crescentsky wasn't gonna stay silent anymore. Annoyance sparked a flame that couldn't stay contained within her closed jaws.

"You wanted me here dragging out old nests like an apprentice when I surpassed twelve moons a half-moon ago!" She interrupted.

"I'm a warrior now. My name is Crescent*sky.*" The Riverclan tabby

narrowed her eyes.

Cats are gonna start taking me seriously now.

"How?" Quietdew challenged. She was one of the cats at the forefront of the emerged crowd. Opaque clouds floated high above their heads, lightening into a pale blue as the sun seeped over the edge of the horizon.

Crescentsky didn't feel much delight in the new day, though. Despite the fact that none of her clanmates appeared to be missing, her meows hardened into a defensive growl.

"Tinyflame and I named each other as warriors beside the Moonpool. We had a self-proclaimed assessment just before that, where we caught some prey along the way." She lifted her chin in front of Lagoonstripe.

"Then I visited with Starclan. They affirmed our warrior names by mentioning mine as they spoke to me."

"Crescentsky! Crescentsky!" Trufflefur and Emberfawn called her name, while Houndspots and Raccoonstripe called Tinyflame's.

A few of the standing cats lifted their tails, mouths opening as they meowed their glee. It'd been so long since anyone had heard from Starclan.

"What did they say!?" Jadestar called from the crowd, but Crescentsky ignored her.

"I'll hear nothing of cats questioning my warrior name. Or Tinyflame's. Got it?"

Her meow was assertive rather than agressive. She let her eyes sweep the small gathering, and then settled her gaze on Lagoonstripe again.

Lagoonstripe dipped her head. Crescentsky was faintly surprised by the lack of argument.

"Congratulations, Crescentsky. I'm sure that no cat here has qualms

about your Starclan-approved name." Her tone was reassuring. The warrior's silver-tabby pelt gleamed under the dawn-lit sun.

Rowanpaw, standing beside Alpinefog and Trufflefur, looked as if she wanted to argue. Saturated orange light lit up one side of her fluffy brown face. However, the she-cat kept her jaws shut with a frustrated glimmer brimming in her eyes.

"But what about-" Sootface began, but he was cut off.

"Just know that your punishment will be cleaning out *all* the old nests," Lagoonstripe went on. "As well as those who followed you." Her gaze hardened when Crescentsky opened her mouth to argue.

"You should know that I had that planned *before* finding out you became a warrior. Racoonstripe ratted you out. He said that Cheetah and Tinyp- Tinyflame had gone with you to the edge of Riverclan's border, but that neither had come back."

"Fine." *I suppose there's worse punishments than that.* What she had wanted most was to keep their warrior names.

"You can have some prey and a rest before you get started." Lagoonstripe shook her head disapprovingly, sitting down.

"Though you shouldn't have done this in the first place, and I *should* make you all stay awake. It's quite tempting..." she sighed, looking towards the skies with an exasperated expression.

"In fact," The sleek silver tabby pricked her ears.

"You'll all stay awake long enough to tell us what Starclan told you."

Beside her, Tinyflame groaned. Crescentsky silently shared her dismay. *I'm too tired to even eat.* But she had no choice other than to comply.

"Don't worry, you'll get a good rest after this." Lagoonstripe waved off the complaint with a paw.

After the she-cats told the clan *most* of what had happened in Crescentsky's Starclan dream, and after; including their narrow escape from the wolves- they dragged their paws to their nests.

"I did my best to answer their questions," Crescentsky said, yawning with her jaws stretched wide.

"-but I'm just too tired."

She recalled twisting some of the story into a slightly different version, like telling the clan that they'd swam the stream because there wasn't any trees close by. That hadn't necessarily been true. There was a hawthorn closer to the Moonpool that Cheetah could have climbed, but the spotted she-cat had chosen not to.

Their reaction to the Starclan news had been a lot stronger.

"Starclan didn't say anything about appointing new clan leaders," Crescentsky remembered saying. "They only said that we'd get a medicine cat sign for Riverclan, and that we shouldn't move territories just yet. Not right before leaf-fall and the oncoming leafbare."

Natrually, a lot of cats had asked her to elaborate.

"Without a leader, Riverclan is doomed. Starclan had better appoint one soon, or get our new medicine cat to do it." Quietdew had fussed.

"I don't know if that's because my dream was cut short, or because they aren't willing to appoint new clan leaders yet." Crescentsky answered what she could and shrugged tiredly for the rest.

Then, of course, there was Starclan's faculty. Crescentsky had left that part out completely, so that by the end it felt like she didn't have much to tell.

The Riverclan warrior also didn't mention Nighthowl. She'd found it unnecessary, and she had wanted to get to her rest all the sooner.

"I hope we don't sleep all day." The tabby she-cat flopped into a dusty nest near the backend of the warriors den. No cat had

complained when Cheetah followed them in.

"I don't care if I do." Tinyflame stumbled into a nest as well, kneading her paws a couple of times and then wrapping her tail around her nose. Crescentsky watched her fall asleep within seconds.

"If Lagoonstripe even lets us sleep all day." Cheetah meowed, not sounding too bothered either way. She purred as she fell into her moss.

It was dark in the den, but a thick sliver of milky dawn light poured in through the entrance, and some parts of the worn-out den roof glowed. Crescentsky pulled the moss closer around herself and burrowed into it. Her throbbing muscles relaxed, and she felt relief.

"Goodnight, Cheetah." The tabby she-cat murmured before she laid her head down. She heard her friend meow it back before they fell asleep.

A/N:

Q1: Who do you think is the new medicine cat, or who do you want it to be?

Q2: Which background/side/minor characters do you want more development of the most? Besides all of them lol 😊 which trust me I am currently adding as much as I can before book 2!

Q3: On that note who's your favorite one? Or even just the most memorable so far!

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[image]

For once, the three she-cats were allowed to wake up on their own time. There was no warrior sticking their head in through the den opening to try and rouse them.

Crescentsky stretched her paws, tongue curling in a massive yawn. She realized that Tinyflame and Cheetah had woken beside her.

"Let's go get these nests over with," Tinyflame said in-between licks. She was already beside the den entrance, where strong afternoon light slanted in. The sunrays had little flecks of dust floating through them.

It really is dirty in here. The dens need a good clean-out.

The bracken in Crescentsky's nest crunched as she stepped out of it, as if also agreeing that it needed a change.

"I suppose it's what we deserve, since we left without telling anyone." Cheetah gave her shoulder-fur a few good licks and then bounded out of the entryway.

Crescentsky and Tinyflame followed her. Before Crescentsky even made it to the fresh-kill pile her stomach was growling. Her denmates branched off to confront Raccoonstripe, who was grooming himself beside a grass-clump. Just beside him a thick band of reeds was growing along the edge of the river.

"Why'd you tell on us?" Cheetah questioned him, and the tom looked impenitent.

"Because Lagoonstripe hounded it out of me. Besides, she had to know what really happened, or else she would have sent some cats off in search of you."

"Did she?" Tinyflame demanded, but the tom shook his head.

"She waited to see if you would return from the Moonpool instead of sending cats in vain, but she wasn't happy about it."

Crescentsky drew out of ear-shot of their banter.
She took a piece of prey, daring Sootface to say something. The Skyclan deputy was padding away with a young squirrel, and tossed a glance back at her. But the tom had the gall not to egg her on.

That's right. You'd better not give me any mouse-bile about my warrior name. She'd half expected him to quarrel openly, now that there was no other cats within earshot.

Crescentsky tore into the food. Trufflefur, Pepperpelt and Emberfawn entered camp from the corner of her eye. Trufflefur approached her with a friendly waving tail. There was a fat vole gripped in his teeth.

"Gooh'd day. I came across on' of these on our border patrol." He dropped his vole beside the fresh-kill pile.

"Maybe I should try some of that trout myself. It looks good."

She almost felt embarrassed, with her face covered in fish scales. Then the brown tom flopped down beside her, his whiskers twitching.

"You look like you're starving. You deserve it, you know. After traveling so far to reach the Moonpool. Do you want some of that vole?" His blue eyes sparkled.

"If Sootface or one of your clanmates argues, I'll tell them I ate most of it." Crescentsky smiled as he looked around. "But it's not like anyone is looking, and it's Greenleaf."

Trufflefur was right. Pepperpelt had retreated back into the nursery for Oatkit. Sootface was picking at his squirrel atop a flat sun-bathed rock. Emberfawn was talking with Racoonstripe and Cheetah now, while her sister Tinyflame sat beside them and listened.

"Plus there's no elders or kits."

Crescentsky thought about it. Oatkit wasn't a kit anymore, since he was supposed to be appointed as an apprentice by now.

But she didn't know if she was hungry enough to eat two pieces of prey. Sure, she was starving- but her belly wasn't accustomed to eating that much.

Crescentsky took her last bites rapidly and settled for saying, "Thanks. But I might be full enough after this one." *And I prefer fish anyway.*

Trufflefur curled his tail, nodding as if he understood.

"A warrior's belly isn't used to overstuffing itself. Anyhow, who do you think the new medicine cat will be?" He spoke amiably, hooking a near-matching trout with his claw.

The tom pulled it toward himself while Crescentsky answered.

"That's a hard one. I'm not sure, honestly." She thought that all of Riverclan's warriors seemed like just that; warriors. Not medicine cat apprentices.

"Maybe Rowanpaw." She lowered her voice. Crescentsky didn't know if her sister was around camp or not.

Trufflefur's gaze narrowed with confusion.

"She seems introverted. But at the same time sure of herself, when she does speak out." was all he said.

"Right? It's an odd choice, I know." Crescentsky nodded.

"But it's because she's so misunderstood. No cat talks to her much, and she's become sort of an outcast. I think there might be something special in store for her in the future. That way she could be a more... integrated member of the clan." Crescentsky spoke avidly as she talked about her chestnut-furred sister.

What she really meant was a more *accepted* member of the clan.

Most of the time when Rowanpaw said something, it brought controversy or strife to the conversation. Alpinefog, her mentor, was often seen correcting her more; rather than agreeing with or praising his apprentice.

But Crescentsky felt it was only because her estranged sister wanted to be recognized as someone valuable and important. Rowanpaw wanted cats to agree with her, even if she was wrong.

"Yeah. But maybe *you* could be one. After all, Starclan communicated with you."
Trufflefur was staring at her imploringly.

"Oh, no." Crescentsky nearly laughed, drawing her chin into her chest-fur.

"I've wanted to be a warrior since my eyes opened. I'm a warrior, tried and true."

Trufflefur shrugged and licked some trout scales off his claws. The orange-stained sky brimmed with warmth beyond the shade covering their pelts.

They continued with the small talk until Trufflefur had stripped the fishes spine clean. Then she politely excused herself to bury her prey-bones and start doing nests. Trufflefur parted ways with a dip of his head.

Crescentsky was hauling dirty bedding away from the apprentices den with Tinyflame and Cheetah just as Jadestar slid back into camp, followed by a curled-lipped Lagoonstripe. Rainpaw padded in behind them, sulkily dragging her paws.

Crescentsky's tabby mentor flung down a pale-bellied salmon. It hit the fresh-kill pile so hard that some of the other prey went flying, sprawling across the other stones and spinning in the taller heaps of grass close by.

Oh, she's mad. Oatkit, who had been playing with a wrinkled brown

leaf underneath Riverclan camp's largest willow tree, widened his eyes and moved away in order to give Lagoonstripe a wide berth.

"Your daughter needs to do just as much as any Riverclan warrior is doing."

Rainpaw moved off as well. But not before indignantly blurting "I want to!" and throwing an accusatory glare at her mother.

"I told you, she's not going out on a patrol without me. I'm her mentor and her mother. You shouldn't have sent her out of camp in the first place!"

"Rainpaw should be a warrior under your leadership by now." Lagoonstripe let a growl creep into her voice. "You should be *proud* to name her as a Skyclan warrior. Besides, she was with her father and my clanmates! Sootface was *right there."*

"I don't care if Sootface was there," Jadestar snapped, looking down her muzzle at the she-cat reproachfully.

"I'm the one who leads my clanmates!" The Skyclan leader's tone was arrogant. Her lashing tail only vexed Lagoonstripe's anger, and as the two she-cats stepped closer to one another, their claws unsheathed and their ears flattened.

Jadestar doesn't trust any cat around her daughter, Crescentsky had time to think before her previous mentor could snap back.

"Then why did you curl your lip at Trufflefur being on the sunfall hunting patrol as well? *He* isn't your warrior!" The Riverclan warrior's voice swelled with fury as she condemned her.

"Don't think I didn't catch that!"

Jadestar's voice in turn filled the clearing gingerly. "It's because-... Well, if I told you that it would..."

The Skyclan leader flattened her ears. All of a sudden she looked like an unsure apprentice standing in the shadow of her interrogating mentor. Jadestar's claws were scouring so far into the grass that you could hardly see them.

What is she hiding? And what could the Skyclan leader possibly have against Trufflefur, a young Thunderclan tom? Crescentsky stared at them both, bewildered.

"Fine. I can't force you to tell us. Just know you're abusing that power in order to control your last remaining kin. Even a blind bat could see it." Lagoonstripe's tone was denouncing. "And you don't lead Trufflefur or us. So you can't dictate which cats go on patrol and with who. Not here you won't." Lagoonstripe's muzzle was a nose-length from the Skyclan leader's.

"Perhaps you're right. Me and you aren't deputies. But Sootface is," Jadestar gave a mild chuckle in a self-assured way.

"*He* should assign the patrols."

"Why, so you can tell him not to assign Rainpaw without you?" Crescentsky said it loud enough for the both of them to hear, but it was Sootface who reacted to her words. The burly tom swiveled his head from atop his flat stone, curling his lip belligerently.

Crescentsky's previous mentor was shaking her head as if Jadestar were mad.

"He's not *Riverclan's* deputy, so he won't be assigning patrols in our camp." Lagoonstripe hissed.

"Now stop changing the subject. You just trudged across Riverclan territory in order to find and disrupt our hunting patrol! There's been nothing wrong with the patrols before today," Lagoonstripe practically spat in the she-cat's face, the fur along her spine lifted.

"You create this problem and then say we need to change it? *You* caused it, Jadestar!" The Riverclan she-cat's ringed tail was fluffed up as she fought not to leap on top of the mottle-coated Jadestar.

Alpinefog emerged from the dirtplace's bush-ringed entrance, his fur ruffled as if he had already heard the arguing from afar. He strode across to meet them.

"Hey now. I'm sure there's a solution to this."

Rainpaw sauntered closer to Cheetah with her ears flattened. She looked depressed, her tail-tip motionless as it dragged along the earth.

"Are you okay?" Cheetah asked, and Rainpaw sat down with a thud.

"Yeah," she murmured in a reserved way, refusing to meet anyone's gaze. Crescentsky thought the she-cat looked a little embarrassed.

"I just wish I could do more things on my own. Become a warrior, you know. Or actually hang out with cats my age anywhere but in camp," she complained in a halfhearted mumble.

"I sort of know how you feel," Cheetah replied.

"Or at least I used to." She turned her head and looked at Tinyflame and Crescentsky with warmth in her gaze.

Crescentsky looked at the stout grey she-cat sitting beside her friend, thinking.

It sounds like she was robbed of the social experiences that other cats our age have had. Although Rainpaw still had her parents, Crescentsky couldn't help but feel that her circumstances were unfair.

She probably feels just like I felt, before I got my warrior name. I mean, she is older than me...

I should speak to Jadestar about it, even if it doesn't change anything. Just maybe not right now. The Skyclan leader and Lagoonstipe were still arguing, and Crescentsky felt that her mentor could hold her own during their disagreement.

She made sure to keep herself busy tugging the moss across the clearing, but kept stopping to listen in on the two heated she-cats. Their voices filled the clearing. Even Houndspots had awoken and peered out from the warriors den opening.

That sucks. He really needs his rest. Lagoonstripe had told her yesterday that his wound was now laced with a raging infection. And there was no cat to treat it until the medicine cat sign

appeared.

Tinyflame drew up beside her. She heaved her giant moss bundle forward with her forepaws, pausing and then panting.

"Jadestar is causing too much tension within the clan." Crescentsky took the chance to say it, and her sister nodded agreeably.

"If you won't train your own apprentices or appoint of-age ones as warriors, then you aren't fit to be a leader."

Jadestar looked offended at that. Her muzzle creased as she lashed her tail from behind Alpinefog's broad shoulders.

A/N: Q1: Can you guess why Jadestar doesn't like Trufflefur?

Q2: Do you think that Trufflefur likes Crescentsky in a romantic way? Any answer is fair lol!

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[image]
[image]

"I *do* train my daughter! If you had eyes in your skull for even your own clan, then you'd know that!"

Rainpaw hunched her blue-grey shoulders at being talked about again. Cheetah frowned and began to say something to the she-cat, but was interrupted.

"Oh please. I'm talking about Oatkit as well. The poor thing lies around all depressed because he knows he hasn't got any future." Lagoonstripe rolled her shoulders, squaring up to the she-cat.

"Wrong. It's because his littermate Cloverkit just died." Jadestar snarled. Her eyes were wild now, and she reared up as if she wanted to leap over Alpinefog, who kept blocking her way.

"Calm down, you guys. Aren't we warriors after all? Can't we settle this over a nice trout?" His voice was cool and unaffiliated.

"That's not the only reason and you know it." Lagoonstripe's pale green eyes narrowed.

"That young tom would've shed some of his grief already, if he had anything other to do than just *sit there* and wallow in it."

Jadestar's tail flicked to and fro, her mouth set in an ugly grimace. She repugnantly eyed Lagoonstripe, then turned on her heels.

"Fine. I'll have my daughter teach him some battle moves in camp tomorrow." She called over her shoulder, heading out into Riverclan's wetland forest again.

"So both of them can ultimately stay stuck in camp or on their mother's hip?" Lagoonstripe muttered with a baleful glare at the

spot where Jadestar had left.

Then the she-cat raised her voice.

"Hey, be back before sunset! Unless you want to lose a life to the wolves!" She left Alpinefog standing alone in the sunlit clearing, grumbling.

Seeing that the argument was over now,
Crescentsky gripped the soiled moss-wad in her jaws and dragged it all the way out of camp, to the foot of a ditch beside an area where the patrolling cats hardly ever trod.

Tinyflame and Cheetah followed her and did the same with the remainder of their bedding. Their fur shone as they passed underneath dappled pools of sun descending between the trees. They waited for Cheetah to claw off the cleanest moss they could find, then hauled it back to camp.

"I feel bad for Rainpaw," Cheetah said when she dropped her bundle in front of the apprentice's den.

"That's the last of it, right?" Alpinefog asked. "And fresh bracken was already placed in all the other dens?"

Crescentsky nodded. Alpinefog gave them an approving purr, his meow thick and kindly.

"Alright then, your punishment is finished. It'll be sundown soon, so help yourself to some prey before the vigil. Cheetah, I'm sorry, but you won't be attending it."

Cheetah nodded in understanding. She actually didn't look interested. Instead her eyes searched camp as if she were looking for someone.

"Take Pepperpelt and Oatkit some prey before you go to sleep. They're in the nursery." He addressed Cheetah in a congenial manner, and the she-cat dipped her head.

"And Tinyflame, it might be best to go and visit Houndspots again. Quickly, before the sun sets." The tom's voice turned soft with

sympathy.

"I hope he's feeling better than he was earlier. He said his wound was hurting him badly." Her littermate fretted and strutted away.

It was brisk out tonight, as the colder winds made their way toward the lake for Leaf-fall. Crescentsky fluffed out her pelt.

Our sleep pattern will be messed up for a couple of days. But we'll be alright.

"I'm not hungry," Crescentsky told the fluffy grey Riverclan warrior.

Then she glanced over at Cheetah, who had crouched down near the fresh-kill pile to gulp down some minnows. Cheetah then waved farewell with her tail.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Crescentsky. I'm gonna hang out with Rainpaw while I wait for Emberfawn's hunting patrol to return, if she'll have me. Good luck with your vigil."

Cheetah didn't forget to pick up some prey and take it to the nursery first, though. She slipped in through the small root structure with Trufflefur's vole in her jaws, leaving the assortment of Riverclan fish resting on the shaded stone where it sat.

That's mindful of her. She could guess that the Skyclan cats preferred land prey to river-caught prey. Crescentsky knew that Trufflefur had only been being polite when he'd eaten that trout earlier.

"We might as well head off now, then. The sun is setting quicker as leaf-fall makes its way."

The tabby warrior couldn't help but agree, as dying light dampened one end of the sky to a mellow petrol. Edges of leaves hanging off the willow trees were turning yellow. They hadn't quite made it to falling off yet, and thankfully the days had stayed warm.

Alpinefog escorted Crescentsky to the guard posts with his small triangular ears pricked. The grass was flattened where other cats had took turns sitting watch day after night, their muzzles facing outward from the adjacent camp walls.

"As soon as Tinyflame gets back, not a word." He said critically. "I'll be telling her the same thing when she arrives. Now, I know it's exciting that we're getting a medicine cat sign and that Starclan has approved of your warrior names, but I'm serious. Not a word." He narrowed his gaze in order to make a point, and Crescentsky nodded agreeably.

Sundown was staining Alpinefog's shoulders with a radiant flaxen glow. His fluffy neck-fur was outlined with the dying light as he sat down to wait for Tinyflame. Crescentsky heard paw-steps and then caught sight of the last hunting patrol. They brushed past her on their way into camp. Emberfawn said hello, but she ignored him.

"That Jadestar made us late!" Quietdew complained as she stepped around them. "She ruined the later half of our hunt by giving us an earful of nonsense." Emberfawn had his ears flattened against his mother's babble. He plodded past the camp entrance with a strained expression, the fish in his jaws clenched tightly.

Crescentsky thought he looked tired from his mother's complaints, not anything that Jadestar had said.

A few moments after the cat's soft pawsteps had receded, Tinyflame returned. Her littermate sat parallel to Crescentsky on the opposite side of the entrance.

"Now listen and don't talk." Alpinefog told them.
"Lagoonstripe didn't expect to be back in time for the pre-sundown lecture, so she told me what to say to you. Besides," he confessed.

"Even if she is in camp right now, I'd rather let her blow off some steam after that disagreement with Jadestar. Which, by the way, was justifiable on my sister's end." His gaze was begrudging as he stared off into the willows.

Then he seemed to recall that he'd told them not to speak, and stiffened, correcting himself.

"Oh, right. Just make sure that if you scent the wolves or see one, you climb the closest tree. That one right there should be good." The long-furred tom nodded toward an easy-to-climb, low-

branching ash tree.

"And equally as important is to screech a warning as loud as you can. We haven't had much wolf-combat training ever since Eveningstar died, so Lagoonstripe told me she would prefer that you guys just stay up a tree. If you wake us up with a yowl, we'll take care of the rest of the clan."

Tinyflame's violet eyes were nervous, gleaming in the dying light.

"You'll be fine," he reassured the she-cat after catching her look. "I doubt any will come tonight."

Crescentsky didn't believe that. She felt they were long overdue for a visit, and Tinyflame knew it, too.

"Just keep your eyes on all angles. They could come from the marsh, the shore, or our wetland forest. Face partly away from each other. And keep checking the wind."

Alpinefog's pawsteps were muted by the thick layer of grass and clover as he padded back through the camp entrance. His fluffy gray tail swished behind him. As his haunches brushed the undergrowth, a few dislodged leaves flitted to the earth.

Naturally, the first few minutes passed by quickly. But then Crescentsky felt herself growing bored, staring into the deepening pools of shadow until there was nothing but inky blackness and weak slivers of moonlight in the sparse forest beyond.

She turned her head to look at Tinyflame. The black she-cat had her watchful gaze on a rise that swept around one edge of their camp.

I wonder if we'll see Starclan's sign tonight, Crescentsky wondered. But then she recalled Cloverpaw saying that it would come when they least expected it.

Her thoughts then flied to the newfound power that Starclan had given her, and all of a sudden it was nearly impossible to stay quiet. She wanted to ask Tinyflame so many things.

Why did Starclan give me *this ability? Why not a clan leader like*

Jadestar, who has more than one life to lose while using it?

...If I even can *use it.* She stifled a sigh, recalling how she had walked around all funny like a newborn kit. *I'll have to do more training to see what that... thing is capable of.*

It was hard to think of this power- the gift, as an extension of herself. Especially when this all had come across so unprecedented.

As Crescentsky thought of that, she felt her doubt growing. It seemed possible that since she could pose a threat to the wolves *as* a wolf, she could pose a threat to her clanmates as well.

And that's the opposite of what she wanted.

A few of them are going to be terrified or in denial like my sister was. She couldn't see any way around that. And it was valid.

But why give her this power if her clan couldn't possibly accept it?

And who knew that Starclan could even *do* such a thing? It wasn't as if she had ever heard of this before. Had some other warrior in the distant past faced something similar? Doubtful.

Starclan didn't tell me anything!

She almost wanted to shake out her pelt, to affirm that it still worked. To turn herself into a wolf now, so that she could find some of the answers herself.

But it wouldn't be wise. Not when her clanmates were right behind the camp walls. One of them might catch the wolf-scent, if they were still awake and outside of their dens.

Imagine that. Her clanmates turning on her because she was a wolf. *That's why I have to tell them soon.*

Tomorrow night she would sneak out and test her newfound potential. As long as the circumstances were right, and no cat saw her slipping out of camp, she could find out what she was capable of.

A/N:

Thought-Provoking Questions;

Q1: Who will be the next cat to die?

Q2: Do you think it's possible that Crescentsky herself could be the next medicine cat?

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[image][image]

But how useful is one cat that can turn into a wolf, really? Doubt dampened her thoughts as Crescentsky pondered beside the camp walls.

I'm not stronger or bigger than any of the wolves that hunt us, am I? Then she realized how crazy her mere thoughts sounded right now.

This is insane! *I get to find out what it's like to be inside of a wolf's body. I must be the first cat ever!*

Crescentsky opened her jaws to check the air again, but all she could smell was stony river-water, stale reed beds and the swirling night air.

Imagine the other possibilities as well, a voice inside of her head taunted her. She lifted her muzzle, looking up at the pelt of stars.

I could protect all of the clans from dangers like these. Twilight tossed a blanket of indigo across her swirling tabby pelt.

I could guard this entrance each and every night, if I find out how to embrace the gift Starclan's given me. When she thought about it that way, it was kind of neat. It even felt like a blessing, in a way.

A soft wind blew past her face, cooling her muzzle and ears. Crescentsky almost impulsively turned and asked her sister what she thought, but stopped herself. Tinyflame's eyes were half-closed in exhaustion.

She's tired. But I know what she would say anyway.

She could imagine the words now; "Crescentsky, it's dangerous. You shouldn't be excited to use an ability like this. You need to be realistic. Whether you're a cat or a wolf, you're going to get injured!"

And the tabby-and-white she-cat knew that her sister had a point.

I'll think of that when it happens, though. Her white-tipped tail couldn't help but swish across the flattened grass. Crescentsky wished that tomorrow night would come faster, when she would have the freedom to sneak off without so many repercussions for being caught.

I'm a warrior now. And after tonight, my name will be secured.

She scanned Riverclan's forest incline from edge-to-edge, trying to take her job as a guard seriously despite the drudgery.

Nothing there. The she-cat squinted toward the marshy Riverclan plains that were lain behind a batch of wide-spaced willows. Certain that all was well, Crescentsky bent down and began grooming her belly.

The silence was long. The night dragged on, each gust of wind causing Tinyflame to shiver awake where she sat.

The Clan is asleep. I could ask her if she wants me to change and scout around or not.

But something held her back.

I've broken enough rules. *I shouldn't break the law of a vigil as well.* Crescentsky sighed despondently and fiddled with a leaf under her forepaw. This was boring.

Then a panting breath split the silence, incoherent and soft, then louder and more brazen.

They almost didn't look up, at first. But when they did, it took the two she-cats awhile to find the source of the sound.

An animal was approaching rapidly. In fact, it looked like more than one. Their burly chests and lean legs blurred together behind the trees.

They're here. And they approached from downwind. Crescentsky and Tinyflame could see their eyes glinting as they passed between the

wide-spaced tree-trunks and brushwood. Crescentsky felt her heart drop, even though apart of her had expected it.

"I guess I have to turn into a wolf now," she broke the vigil uneasily. This wasn't the circumstances she preferred for only her second experience of trying it.

Her voice turned assertive. "Go inside the camp and warn the clan. Tell them to climb the trees. Hide in the clefted rock and stay there. I won't let them past the entrance."

Or I'll die trying. A splash of fear tumbled over her pelt, causing Crescentsky's hackles to rise in foreboding.

"I can't just leave you here, Crescentsky. What if you die alone?" Despite saying this, Tinyflame looked petrified.

"I'll be fine. Warn the camp and make them stay inside," the warrior growled determinedly.

"But don't tell them anything yet. Just say... just say-...!" she grew frustrated as she tried to think of an excuse.

"Say that the wolves started fighting each other after I ran into the undergrowth. Uh, or say that they almost killed me. And then they began fighting over me."

That part might ring true since I know I'll have injuries.

Tinyflame had a wild look in her eye as she raised a forepaw, her mouth agape, then lowered it again.

"I don't know, just lie!" Crescentsky snapped and flattened her ears. She could hear their pawsteps thundering closer now. They were so rapid that they hardly missed a beat.

"You have to go!" She tossed a fearful glance to the side, but couldn't catch sight of them between the tree-trunks anymore. It sounded like they'd split up, with the continual panting and loping footfalls coming from two different directions at once.

"No, I won't. I-I shouldn't," her sister spluttered.

"That's wrong, to just leave you here like that. You'll be killed." Tinyflame argued, her jaws gaping as she fought to find the words.

"Tinyflame, seriously? I can turn into *a wolf.* Go!"

Tinyflame's tail bushed out with terror as Crescentsky was bowled over in front of her, a wolf's kneecap crashing into her cheek and knocking her off her paws.

Tinyflame's disagreements had cost them too much time. The tabby she-cat somersaulted head-over-heels as she was flung rolling across the earth. Before she came to a stop the wolf sank its jaws into her flanks, to which she jerked and writhed immediately.

It'll crush my ribs!

She became a surging mass of tabby fur, flicking out her hindlegs and pushing her forepaws against the wolf's jaws. She sank her teeth into the fleshy part of its lips and hissed with her back claws tearing fur out of its neck.

It let go just enough for her to slip out of its grip, but Crescentsky could feel the blood welling up in the gouges its teeth had left. She rotated right-side-up as she fell to the ground, then streaked for Tinyflame's terrorized form.

Her sisters pelt was so spiky that she looked more like a porcupine than a cat. Tinyflame's spine was arched in a falcated position. She had her forepaw raised in the face of the predator, who was cornering her up against the camp wall.

"Use your teeth!" Alarmed, Crescentsky dodged around a stepping pair of wolf legs. Before she fully cleared it the animal bent down to reach for her, and fastened long curving fangs around her tail.

She ripped free by shooting forward. Fur and skin wrenched off, along with a long strip of flesh that left a gaping wound at the end of her tail.

And yet adrenaline only helped dim the pain. Crescentsky winced but didn't falter.

The first didn't seem intent on grabbing her sister and killing her head-on. Instead, each time Tinyflame tried to dodge around it and flee the animal nipped her with vicious fangs and jerked her back. The third time, its teeth found purchase in Tinyflame's chest, and the she-cat yowled with her clawless paws raking over its muzzle. She was lifted off the ground as the wolf reared its head, biting harder to shake her instead of letting go.

Her sister's black tail was lashing above the earth as she jerked and spasmed. She was shrieking as she tried to free herself.

Is it safe to switch yet? What if I hurt Tinyflame?! But her instincts were screaming at her to do something. She couldn't just stand there and watch her littermate die.

Crescentsky's haunches almost slipped from beneath her. But she righted herself and lept for the wolf's face, spitting as loudly as she could until it blinked, flinching, and stepped back.

I wouldn't like it if my prey ganged up on me either!

The Riverclan she-cat was trying to copy the style of intimidating attack that Jadestar had used, spinning so that she was covered on all angles, and smacking the earth between them with both of her forepaws. Somehow, the more you got in their face, closer to their muzzle and eyes, the less confident of a hunter they behaved.

Intimidating tactics actually work, if you use them before they get ahold of you! She growled, pleased to find that it was effective.

But the wolf that she had ran from in order to defend Tinyflame followed her. Now Crescentsky was flanked by two of them instead of one.

She looked fiersome, her fur puffed up and her tail brushing the ground in a curved ridge as she lifted her lip and let out snarl. The one holding her littermate finally dropped Tinyflame, who fell against the earth with her torso bleeding. The smaller she-cat gasped and slowly stood up to begin hobbling away. Her forepaws kept threatening to buckle beneath her.

Starclan, please let her live through those injuries. Don't you dare take my sister!

A trail of blood was streaked across the grass, starting from where Tinyflame had fallen.

Crescentsky didn't think anymore. She just shook out her fur between the wolves and a retreating, wounded Tinyflame.

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[image]

The two wolves had been snapping valiantly for her neck. Now they looked confused. They couldn't just leap over or around as if she were a troublesome rock anymore.

Crescentsky was disoriented as well. The change had happened so fast. Being in such a sizeable body wasn't easy to adjust to.

But she could see and feel just fine, so she planted her hefty paws and looked at the two wolves.

"Get out," the Riverclan warrior said in her wolfish voice, which rumbled and vibrated deep in her chest. The two didn't respond.

Had they understood her or not? One of them moved to peer around her shoulder, while the other turned its muzzle to the side as if bored.

Had they even noticed the transformation? They *must* have.

So could they not understand it, or did they just not care?

Surely I smell different than they do. Their scents were overpowering and dank, pure canine and predator-ish.

Maybe I could show them rather than tell them that this is my clan's territory.

Crescentsky's heart fluttered apprehensively, as she realized that she had no idea what she was doing.

Tinyflame was waiting for something to happen as well, it seemed. Behind Crescentsky, she was partly submerged in the overcast shadow of an elm tree with creeping ivy. Her haunches were pressed against the earth uncertainly, and she looked as small as a squirrel.

When the wolf who'd been looking around her shoulder side-stepped in order to get to Tinyflame, Crescentsky shoved back *hard*.

She was met with a deep-throated growl. It vibrated from the wolf's throat to his abdomen, so that she nearly flinched back from the formidable volume of it.

You're not touching my sister or my clanmates! I don't care how skinny you are. Just leave and go hunt a rabbit!

The two wolves showed their teeth, and lifted their tails higher. She knew what that meant.

They're threatening me. I can do that too, though. Crescentsky tried to growl with the rumbling reverberation that a throaty wolf growl held. But it felt so strange and vibratory that she cut it off partway.

To them, it probably seemed as if she were guarding her own prey. She nearly shuddered, repulsed.

Then Crescentsky showed her wolf teeth, and was shocked by how much air streamed against her gums. There was so much sheer surface on her muzzle now. Her fangs were long and gleaming, curvy and white as a crescent moon. Her velvety wolf muzzle stretched more than twice as long, so that she could fit her entire mouth across a cat's back.

She snapped down on one of their muzzles without hesitating. They were so in her space now that she didn't even have to step forward. The receiving grey wolf snarled and flattened its ears, cowering away as if it hadn't expected such retaliation.

I just have to bite them. Just like I use my jaws instead of my paws in order to catch prey now. She lifted her thick wolf tail, which felt heavy and dense, nothing like her wispy cat tail was.

"Get out. Leave now." Crescentsky insisted in her guttural voice again. It was still in the cat language, but held none of the clarity that a cat's voice did.

The two wolves didn't seem to hesitate this time. They ignored her gnarled, grating words. Both advanced with their muzzles lowered.

It was a strategic effort in order to protect their softer throats.

Crescentsky backpedaled and did the same. She felt sure that if Tinyflame was still there, she would've been stepped on by huge hindpaws.

Good. If Tinyflame got away then that makes things easier.

Crescentsky's triangular wolf ears were angled back uneasily, however.

Two of them and one of me... and I don't even know how to fight in this body. She felt the fur along her spine twitching involuntarily. The other two wolves were the same size as her. Crescentsky side-stepped adversely, trying to lead them away from the Riverclan camp instead of assailing them head on.

They didn't follow her. Instead one made for the camp entrance, and the other trotted behind on confident foot-falls.

No! She lunged for them.

Crescentsky tripped after she failed to fully extend both of her elongated forelegs. It was still super weird being the same height and length as such a substantial creature. And so her furry chest hit the earth and slid across it, bowling into one set of hindlegs and knocking a single wolf from its paws.

The second one was hit by the first one's blocky skull, and stumbled. They fell on top of her immediately, one of them barking an offended warning and the other snarling in her face before placing well-aimed grappling bites along her jaw.

Crescentsky felt her muzzle getting torn. Fangs were digging into her flesh, leaving rivulets of flowing blood where healthy, closed sinew had been.

She didn't like the sensation of her own hot blood running down her chin, to say the least.

The Riverclan warrior tried to stand up by flexing her legs. But her muzzle was being assailed fast, and she couldn't think to bite back.

She couldn't even *see* anything, save for the flashing of yellow-stained teeth and ruffled grey fur.

And then trying to defend with her legs, not her teeth, failed her. Her hind-legs scrabbled against the ground, her blunt front claws scraping through the other wolf's fur fruitlessly.

Oops. I have to use my teeth, not my claws!

The wolf serrating her muzzle had now pinned her with its jaw. By this point, she had too many bite-wounds to count. Blood soaked the front half of her head.

Writhing and kicking with the dirt being ground into one side of her face, Crescentsky finally tore her maw free and snapped for its ear, latching on. She rose up, and the animal raised its huge chest to meet her.

She could feel the power of their bodies thrashing as each of them fought to gain control. Legs scrambled while claws scratched, teeth snapped while blood spewed. The second wolf leaned forward to land a cruel bite on her belly, and she nearly curled into herself with agony. But Crescentsky could feel her teeth almost meeting together in the first wolf's ears.

Don't let go! Her mind screamed, and adrenaline coursed through every rivulet in her veins. Blood was leaking into her mouth with a satisfying pulse, tangy with a hint of copper.

She was forced to let go when the second wolf bit her in the haunch so hard that it nearly brushed bone. Almost cursing, she turned on that one and crushed her jaws around its foreleg, despite the fact that it was now gripping her scruff in its barbed teeth.

My hind-leg is destroyed. She could feel warm, wet blood running down her foot as she was shaken back and forth.

But the first wolf had had enough. It left a bloody trail with the split wound from its flopping ear-tip, panting and lop-sided as it sauntered away.

One of them is leaving!

Crescentsky watched its bony haunches retreat from the camp entrance clearing before it disappeared behind some shrubbery, toward Shadowclan's territory.

A sharp sting of pain across her face brought her back into to focus.

The remaining wolf had split her brow. A crimson wound was sending a thin line of blood down and around her eyes instantaneously.

It continued its valiant assault, snapping for the softer flesh around Crescentsky's throat. She ducked her head, falling backwards into a gully and slipping amongst some dead leaves.

Crescentsky lept to her paws immediately. The pinch of pain in her bitten haunch caused a powerful nausea to roll inside her belly. It was so unbearable that she paused, lifted her hind-leg to a higher position, and then surged forward.

The wolf thought it was rid of her, and so it was slipping its first set of forelegs over the camp wall's tattered entrance when she cleared the rise. Crescentsky rapidly limped across the torn and bloody grass, catching up and snatching the very end of its tail in-between her teeth.

The wolf turned on her in a flurry, its whine laced with distress, then sharpening into an outraged snarl.

Broad shoulders fell down onto one side of the den entrance, crushing it as Crescentsky dragged the wolf backwards by its tail. Just like it had done to her earlier.

Doesn't feel as good when it happens to you, does it?

Her satisfaction was short-lived. She only managed a few inches. The young warrior had blood seeping into one eye, and her breathing had long grown tattered.

She let go when the wolf nearly hit her good eye with its frantic gnashing teeth. Since the predator was already partway on the ground, she took the opportunity to pounce on top of it before it could stand up.

Her body felt heavier than a star, wider than a tree-trunk. She let all of her weight sink against the animal's spine. Crescentsky's breath was so deep and rapid that she couldn't speak if she had wanted to. But still, she startled when it twisted its neck to look up at her. It was genuinely wary of her now- that, or the situation it had found itself in.

If Crescentsky would've had time to think such a thing, she'd have known that the clan was watching what was happening right now.

With a pounding heart full of adrenaline that matched the other wolves, she leaned down and showed her teeth in the creatures face, meeting its yellow eye.

A Quick Thank You To Silent Readers

who may not comment much, but still make up more than half my reader base

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[image]

It stilled underneath her. The leering yellow eyes were difficult to read.

Crescentsky had a forepaw planted firmly against its torso. Her chest-fur nearly brushed the wolf's own as she leaned over it. She could hardly see her own forepaws for the thick, long fur covering its belly and breast.

Then, when she leaned forward to send it reeling away with one last bite, the animal kicked out valiantly. Before she knew what was happening it opened its jaws and started biting desperately. Crescentsky flinched when teeth met her bloodied chin and sent searing white-hot agony through her once again.

I can't give up yet! She told herself, but she couldn't stop the trembling from overexertion.

Yet as she let it up, the animal gave a timorous whine and turned to flee.

Oh. Its triangular ears were flat against its skull, tail tucked under its rump as it trudged away.

Thank Starclan!

It kept making those pitiful noises as its paws took it farther and farther away from Riverclan's camp, till its pelt blended in with the murky marshland shadows.

Still slightly surprised, Crescentsky sank to her knees.

It's over. The relief she felt was something beyond comprehension.

Her chest heaved as she fought to breathe normally. It felt like she could take in more air in this body, but that she had to force herself

to breathe deeper in order to receive it.

Nearly half of Crescentsky's thick-furred pelt was covered in blood. Most of it was her own. The night air was quiet after the second wolf's retreating paw-steps faded.

"Wow." A breathless voice startled her. She turned to search for the source, limping on the leg that was injured.

It was her sister. Tinyflame had hid herself so well that Crescentsky couldn't see her at first.

"Can you believe it? Once again we're somehow alive!"

Her littermate crawled partway out from beneath a bramble bush with giant thorns. She said the words with utter disbelief, neck craned to look up at Crescentsky.

But even as she'd said it, Tinyflame's voice was strained, as if trying to suppress the pain of her injuries.

Only for now. If we don't die from blood loss or infection first. Her littermate's chest-fur was matted with blood, torn fur, and ripped flesh. Her back and head had long, thin scratches from the thorns.

This time, Crescentsky couldn't muster up the energy to act positive. That fight had felt like a wake-up call. She feared she couldn't even open her mouth to speak properly, for parts of it were split open and bloody.

Since Crescentsky didn't reply, the silence stretched on. An owl hooted from somewhere in the woods.

She stayed sitting down, trying to calm her breathing. She had the metallic taste of blood in her mouth, and her wounds stung like they were lit up with fire. The one above her brow was still leaking blood into her eye, so she kept it half-closed. The one on her haunch had soaked through all of the fur around it, and still continued to do so.

But overlaying all of that, a sort of shock settled onto her shoulders. It nearly felt like a blanket of snow.

I'll have to do that again. And again and again. She definitely didn't *want* to.

"I'm sorry I didn't help, Crescentsky. I'm sorry I couldn't. I was useless." Tinyflame sounded ashamed. She seemed to want to say more, but became too upset, her eyes shimmering and her tail lashing in lament.

MrrrOW! These wounds are really starting to hurt! I can't console her right now!

"I'm changing back." Crescentsky warned her, and Tinyflame stayed where she was.

"Wait! Not here." Her sister intervened as Crescentsky braced to shake herself.

Tinyflame glanced toward the camp entrance, her tone urgent as she gestured toward the open wetland forest.

"Alpinefog and Lagoonstripe *saw* you. I think the whole clan did. You can't change back right here. Go out by the stream or something. Hurry!"

Crescentsky's jaw nearly fell open, as apprehension sent a chill of cold water down her spine.

What if they saw the change?

The Riverclan warrior gazed at Tinyflame with her small wolf eyes. Then Crescentsky gave a quick nod and fled, rushing into the willow tree forest on tepid pawsteps. She crashed through the side of a berry bush, unaccustomed to running from such a tall stature, and from being so large compared to the undergrowth.

She didn't go far, but it was long enough to experience just how much faster she could go. Re-exhilarated, and worried by Tinyflame's news, Crescentsky rapidly changed back.

Retracing her pawsteps took a lot longer in the body of a cat, as her hauch all but dragged in the mud. It left a trail in the parted grass, throbbing with renewed pain.

"Alpinefog and Lagoonstripe rushed out of camp after the fighting got really loud- after you turned," Tinyflame whispered quickly, beckoning for Crescentsky to join her beside some gently waving reed fronds. Their stems were bent at an angle, so that the she-cats were well hidden in shadow and could look out toward the camp wall.

A bullfrog croaked from deep inside the river-brush somewhere beyond. Crescentsky's eyes widened, as she wondered what this meant.

"Why didn't they attack, then?"

"I was already hidden by that point. They didn't see either of us," Tinyflame explained in a murmur.

Her littermate locked gazes with her. "All they saw was three wolves fighting. Or- two wolves fighting another one. Then they retreated back into camp," she finished with a wheeze.

The smaller black she-cat was huddled with her forelegs curled underneath herself. Her purple eyes kept glancing out towards the camp entrance, in case one of their clanmates emerged. Crescentsky noticed that her littermate's blood-soaked chest wounds were leaking onto her paws.

"Are you okay? You should have ran when I told you to." Concern laced her voice.

Tinyflame didn't answer that.

"We can tell them the wolves went for us and we tried to fight back. That we were cornered. And we got injured." Her words were clipped and sounded painful. Crescentsky tried to feign off worry.

"But then they started fighting each other, which gave us the chance to get away."

She's strategizing how to explain this to the clan.

Though Crescentsky didn't like lying as much as the next cat, she had to agree. She couldn't tell them Starclan's truth, not yet.

It's too soon. I barely know anything about it yet. Half the cats in the clan don't even trust me...

"Alright. And what about the reason as to why we didn't yowl and warn the clan? Or why we didn't climb a tree like we were told?"

Tinyflame thought hard about that one. Crescentsky searched for a reason as well, and could only land on measly excuses.

"I guess we'll say that we wanted to protect the camp. And that we quickly realized what a bad idea it was. I mean, we do have the wounds to prove it."

Tinyflame leaned back.

"They might not believe it. They saw *three* wolves."

"We'll just make it up as we go," Crescentsky licked a paw and wiped some blood off her eye.

My wounds are still there, of course. But somehow they've shrank down with my body, or else that leg would've been sliced clean off whenever I changed back. She sighed and let it fall limp beneath her. It was too painful to use any of the muscles in that haunch.

Perhaps there were even severed tendons.

What will I do then, if I can never use my back leg again? The thought was more horrifying than the idea of having to face down the wolves again.

"Okay, great. Yep. We'll make up a lousy jumble of kit-excuses. And we'll look irresponsible for not warning the clan. What if our vigil gets rejected?" Tinyflame whispered in the shadows beside Crescentsky. Then she took a deep, shuddering breath, as if her wounds were still troubling her.

"You got a better idea?" The tabby she-cat glanced at her sister.

Tinyflame thought for a moment longer and then shrugged. "I guess not."

"I'm glad we're both still here," Crescentsky mitigated. The Riverclan warrior bent to lick one of her sister's fuzzy black ears.

They couldn't stay there any longer. There was no doubt in their minds that the entire clan was awake, after that snarling, chaotic struggle just outside the Riverclan camp.

And so it was no surprise when she padded past the broken barrier and the entirety of her clanmates, as well as Skyclan was standing there.

"You didn't climb the trees?" Crescentsky asked, as first Lagoonstripe and then Alpinefog strode forward with tails flicking irritably.

"Of course we did. We were just climbing down. We planned to send a few cats to fetch you from the trees, and scope out the area. It's been quiet for long enough now."

"Why didn't you sound the alarm, Crescentsky?" Her previous mentor's gaze was so condemning that Crescentsky chuckled nervously.

I'm always on her nerves nowadays... I hope she still likes me.

"And you know very well that-Wait, how'd you get those wounds?" Lagoonstripe noticed the drying blood staining her fur in the faint moonlight.

"Um, we were going to climb the trees like you told us to...But then we thought we could defend the camp from the wolves ourselves."

It doesn't even sound brave. It just sounds stupid.

The silver-striped tabby's gaze grew incredulous, and she looked the two of them up and down.

"How are you still alive?" She tipped her head slightly, which was odd for Lagoonstripe.

"Alpinefog and I came to check on you when we heard snarling and growling beyond the camp entrance, but no cat was anywhere to be

found. We only saw the wolves fighting each other, so we came back and told the clan to evacuate the dens and climb the trees."

"It was the oddest thing I've ever seen. They were trying to kill each other, right at our camp entrance." Quietdew said. Crescentsky tried to look dumbfounded and dazed.

"We watched them run off one by one, into the woods while we were waiting in the trees. But we never saw the wolves attacking either of *you*," she added.

"That's because we dragged ourselves under some bramble vines. It happened so quickly... And by the time the camp woke up, we were already up a tree," Crescentsky began.

"We almost lost our lives. Crescentsky helping me is the only reason I managed to climb up a willow." Tinyflame lifted her chin, sounding confident as she told the lie.

Her heart warmed as she turned sidelong to look at her littermate. Despite it being a half-truth, Tinyflame was showing commendation to Crescentsky, especially in the eyes of their clanmates.

"We got these wounds when we were attacked at the camp entrance," she added.

They have to believe me! "The wolves nearly dragged me off, but I scratched one of their eyes so I could get away."

Crescentsky stretched out the hind-limb so her clanmates could better see the worst injury. She stifled a genuine, agonizing cry at the wound's movement.

Ow. Ow. Ow! The puncture wounds on her face, neck, belly and flanks were bee-stings compared to her tormenting haunch. It felt like fire-ants were biting into it over and over.

"They fought against three wolves and lived? That's awesome," Rainpaw whispered, and Jadestar glared at her daughter.

"It is not awesome to risk your life. Besides, they might not even live!"

"How many wolves were there again?" Sootface spoke up loudly, his tone of voice taunting.

"And how did you climb a tree with injuries like those?"

He thinks we're lying. And, well, in a lot of ways we are.

"Want me to prove it?" Crescentsky challenged, standing up with her one supporting hind-paw nearly buckling beneath her.

They won't make me do it. Great Starclan, would they? Apprehension shot through her.

"That won't be necessary," Lagoonstripe assured.

"There was three wolves." Tinyflame admitted truthfully, her voice ringing out over the assembled cats.

Pepperpelt lifted her tail, green eyes sparking with false pretense.

"After Oatkit and I were safely perched up a tree, I watched the wolves from above. We all did. I saw one nearly step over the barrier, and another one pull it back." Her blue eyes were accusatory.

"So I know for a fact that there was two, but I simply don't believe that there was three." The speckled grey she-cat turned up her nose.

"The two of you couldn't have escaped if there was. Some cat is lying, and the other is covering her tracks."

A/N:

Q1: Do you like longer or shorter chapters? under 10 minutes to read, or more towards 30?

Q2: On that note, would it have been better to split this chapter into 2? Was it too long?

60 🌙

[image]

(Raccoonstripe)

Which character from this book should I draw next?

"Yeah, they probably ran as soon as they *saw* the wolf. We should check if that's even their blood or not." Rowanpaw spoke up from somewhere in the crowd, sounding eager to investigate.

"I'd bet a fish tail that they rolled in some of the wolf's blood. Pepperpelt, Sootface and I think that they're both lying!"

Crescentsky winced. *Great Starclan.*

"Everyone knows that Tinyflame is terrified of the wolves. She's never even faced one!" Her littermate meowed matter-of-factly.

Lagoonstripe searched the audience for Rowanpaw's brown ears until her steely gaze fell over the she-cat.

"They're not lying. For one, those wounds are real; use your eyes. And for two, we saw three wolves when we made it past the camp entrance. There *was* three of them- at least at first." Lagoonstripe snapped beside her littermate Alpinefog, startling Sootface from his sneer.

"Do you really believe that mouse-dung? There's no way a couple of day-old warriors, and both she-cats at that, went up against three wolves and lived to tell the tale." The dark-faced tom said inarguably, as if it were simply unbelievable.

"Can't you keep your whiskers to yourself, Sootface? I'm pretty sure if it was *you* we were talking about, then you'd believe every second of it." Trufflefur had a haughty grin, as the Skyclan deputy's gaze hardened even farther.

"So goes the question of whether these warriors completed their

vigil or not. It's still pre-dawn and they've broken the truce not to speak." Jadestar cut in, her jaws parting in a massive jawn.

"In my opinion, they have." Lagoonstripe said, turning her striped head.

"No matter what any cat says, for whatever reasons, those wolves didn't cross the boundary. They stayed outside the camp walls tonight."

"That's not because of anything that *they* did." Quietdew flipped her grey-and-white tail, annoyed. Rowanpaw nodded her agreement.

"They held the wolves off, though!" Oatkit called out, but he was quickly shushed by his mother.

"Until they ran away, and failed to warn the rest of us!" Sootface snarled.

"Just because Tinypaw and Crescentpaw got lucky *not to die* isn't reason enough to reward them breaking the rules." Rowanpaw seemed more confident in saying such things beside the older warrior Quietdew.

Maybe they *had* gotten lucky- especially in the eyes of the clan, but her phrasing still rubbed Crescentsky the wrong way.

Plus, Rowanpaw had called them by their apprentice names. Why? *Did she just forget?*

"We aren't going to strip their warrior names for bad circumstances, Rowanpaw." Alpinefog said to his apprentice in a shrewd tone.

"The fact that they're alive now means quite the opposite, actually. We should allow them to be warriors." He then twitched his small gray ears.

"Something I find odd, though, is that the wolves never fight each other like that," Alpinefog's voice was steady and loud, his meow authoritarian.

"You didn't see it from up close like we did. Sure, they skirmish over

bodies... wrestle and show teeth at each other. But these ones were all-out attacking."

"It doesn't matter why the wolves do what they do. We'll never know why!" Rowanpaw butted in again with a condemning tone.

Lagoonstripe agreed with the russet-furred apprentice this time, but she looked like she wanted to cuff Rowanpaw for saying so.

"Whatever the reason, we were *all* lucky tonight. But Crescentsky and Tinyflame, make sure that you always yowl the alarm. It's the most important part of standing guard. I won't warn you without consequence again." Her gaze fell over their bloody wounds again, and Crescentsky wearily lapped at the drying one on her tail. The fur surrounding it was matted.

Her and Tinyflame shared a relieved look. *Whew. We didn't get caught this time.* Still, she knew that she had to tell the clan sooner rather than later.

The longer I keep this from them, the bigger the consequences are for exposing it.

"Some cats help me lick their wounds clean. These are at serious risk for infection... so let Starclan send us our medicine cat, and soon," Lagoonstripe prayed.

"Rowanpaw and Rainpaw, fetch some cobwebs. The more the better." Lagoonstripe continued to command the cats in the clan.

"And then we must help them to the warriors den." She sighed, her tabby pelt rippling in distress.

"Why not the medicine cat's den?" Oatkit asked, and Alpinefog answered him.

"There's no use putting them in the medicine cat's den right now. The nests in there are falling apart, and we've got no idea which herbs are for what. In fact, a few of them are probably expired."

"Does any cat here know if coltsfoot is good for wounds? I think I remember what that looks like," Jadestar asked hopefully.

"No, it's not," Trufflefur stated. "It's used for shortness of breath and whitecough."

Jadestar sat beside Lagoonstripe and began licking at Crescentsky's wounds roughly. She winced.

"I'm guessing you don't know anything that *is* useful for external injuries? Preventing infection, things like that?" She sounded a bit scornful in her probing.

"I'm sorry, but I don't. I only know of coltsfoot because my clan had whitecough last leaf-bare."

The brown tom looked crestfallen to be found so unhelpful. After watching Racoonstripe join in to clean Crescentsky's sticky fur, he scooted forward as well.

The four warriors surrounded her in a symmetrical pattern, cleaning her off while the other cats talked. Cheetah and Houndspots licked the blood from Tinyflame's chest-fur and forelegs, while the lithe black she-cat looked on with a shimmering gaze full of pain.

I hope Tinyflame is alright. The wounds on her chest look deep. Then she wondered if her sister was suffering from a punctured lung, and her tail quivered with nerves.

After awhile Crescentsky felt herself slouching against Trufflefur's shoulder, though. She couldn't help it.

I could easily fall asleep right here on my paws...

Her wounds stung *so bad,* even after the thick layering of cobweb was plastered all over them. She felt the best relief would be to sleep through it.

"You should go and get some rest." Emberfawn said, and Crescentsky headed straight for the warrior's den.

"Cheetah and Rowanpaw, help them along. I'll send a poppy seed for the both of you tomorrow. It's about all I can do," Lagoonstripe mewed apologetically.

"I don't know the right dosage, so we'll just go with half a seed for the each of you. Alpinefog and I have been giving Houndspots that same amount each day. But we're scared to give him more in case it makes his infection worse. If he sleeps more, would it be easier for him to heal, or the opposite?" She sounded unsure. There was nothing that Crescentsky could say to reassure her. Only a medicine cat could provide such advice.

Cheetah hadn't said much as she boosted the smaller Tinyflame along, but she looked like she wanted to. Crescentsky could tell that she was biting her tongue, seething with questions unable to be asked in front of the other cats.

Instead of supporting Crescentsky with her shoulder, though, Rowanpaw stayed a pace behind. As soon as they brushed through the den entrance ivy-screen, the chestnut-brown she-cat shoved into Crescentsky's haunches from behind.

Crescentsky turned and waited for her apologize, but when she didn't the tabby warrior blinked and asked "What was that for?"

"I don't know, maybe because you don't *need* help. You've got plenty from everyone else already." Rowanpaw shrugged so agressively that her copper paws shook underneath her.

"See, this is why we didn't invite you to the Moonpool journey." Tinyflame said while their sister flattened her ears, spitting.

"The one that you should've died on?"

Rowanpaw turned around and raced from the den. Uncomfortable silence filled the air afterward, and Cheetah didn't comment.

Silverthorn shrubs on the inside of the warriors den, tightly woven and blotting out all of the moonlight, gently clattered together as a strong wind blew outside.

"You didn't need to be that harsh." Crescentsky eventually opened her jaws to complain.

"You're blaming me?!" Tinyflame sounded outraged.

"No. But you know Rowanpaw's upset that we got our warrior names and she didn't. That, or because we didn't invite her. We should talk to her tomorrow, or whenever we see her again."

"Upset doesn't excuse wanting us dead."

"You know she didn't mean it."

"Whatever. You can talk to her, but I'm staying out of it." Tinyflame kneaded her paws into the bedding, settling down.

"I stopped fishing for that trout a long time ago."

"You three are confined to the camp while your woulds heal." Lagoonstripe told them at mid-morning the next day, after they had eaten and taken their poppy seeds.

Houndspots was sitting up in the back of the den. He looked rebellious.

"Again? We all know that my wound's not going to heal. Just let me go on a hunt this time, Lagoonstripe!"

The silver-tabby warrior shook her head no.

"As soon as the medicine cat sign shows you'll be the first cat treated, Houndspots. Now, Crescentsky- let's see if you can move that leg."

She could, but it was incredible agony to do so. And she didn't want any cat examining her closely anyways, for fear that her missing claws would be discovered.

"I- I can. But the poppy seed hasn't taken affect yet. It still hurts so badly that I don't want to right now. Please don't make me."

Lagoonstripe gazed at her evenly for a moment, and then nodded.

"Okay. Some other time, then- when it troubles you less."

After Lagoonstripe left, Crescentsky stayed in her nest with her head on her paws. Houndspots did the same, his wound stinking of sour infection anytime he twitched or moved. The tom kept falling in and out of a fitful slumber. The clean moss in his nest was pushed over the sides and onto the flattened, dusty den floor.

High sun had long surpassed, and her haunch wound was so tender that it stung worse than fire ants to move even a whisker. She hoped it was okay.

Half a poppy seed only helps for so long... maybe it'll be fine, once it heals.

More than that, though, she hoped that Tinyflame was alright. No cat could diagnose the she-cat's injuries until Riverclan's new medicine cat was chosen, and then trained by Starclan.

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"I need to talk to Rowanpaw," Crescentsky said impatiently when Cheetah came to visit them some time later.

"Alright. I'll fetch her for you. I saw her eating at the fresh-kill pile a moment ago."

A soft-scented breeze blew through the den entrance. It smelled of willow bark and waterlogged reeds. Crescentsky longed to go hunting or stand guard or pad around camp or do *anything*. But it would only cause her blinding agony.

When Cheetah returned, she had two catfish gripped between her teeth, swaying by their tails. Their smooth bodies gleamed even in the dim light of the den-space. She set them down beside the two nests and began shaking her head.

"Sorry. Rowanpaw said that she's busy. Said she can't talk right now, but I brought you and Tinyflame something."

Crescentsky pictured her estranged littermate sitting alone beside

the fresh-kill pile.

"Okay then. Did she say that she'd stop by tomorrow?"

"No."

"If you can, just ask her to visit the warriors den later. I'd like to speak to her." Crescentsky sighed and curled her tail around herself.

She could hear Pepperpelt lecturing Oatkit about trying to climb the tattered den walls. Even farther off and more incoherent than that, Lagoonstripe was arguing with Jadestar again. This time, Sootface had joined in. Stress filled her chest until she almost couldn't bear to sit in the den any longer.

I need to be out there. I should be out there saying something. Skyclan is causing too much strife in our camp.

"I'll go and tell her now. You guys should eat and get some rest, though."

Crescentsky nodded half-heartedly. Her thoughts wandered back to yesterday.

I don't think the wolves will come back for a few days.

But what if they're capable of seeking vengeance? Was that a silly question? She couldn't tell.

They *had* looked noticeably skinny lately. There was less cats for them to kill around the lake. So why didn't they just leave?

Surely there's a better prey source out there, and the wolves can smell it as well as they smell us. As far as she knew, the last time they'd killed a clan cat was Cloverkit's death.

It was frustrating, not knowing any shred of what the wolves knew; or why they did what they did. So the tabby-and-white warrior couldn't come to any conclusions. There was no way to figure out the wolves and their thoughts, not without trying to communicate with one again.

Or using her power and seeing if that changed her hunter's influence. It hadn't *seemed* to so far... but then again, she hadn't really hunted anything as a wolf yet.

It looks like my chances of experimenting with Starclan's gift are put on hold, for now. She couldn't imagine slipping out through the dirtplace barrier with her cobweb-covered wounds. They hurt too badly.

Crescentsky was disappointed to find out that Rowanpaw didn't turn up the next morning.

Instead, the injured she-cat had a fitful and broken sleep, followed by a groggy arousal. Houndspots kept waking all of the warriors with his dreadful drawn-out moaning.

"It hurts." He yowled, kicking out feebly and scattering all of the moss in his nest. Crescentsky could hardly see him in the dark den-space.

"It hurts so badly. Starclan, just take me now! Please, before I eat deathberries. I can't take this anymore," he whimpered, and Crescentsky lifted her head. She was about to step out of her nest and comfort the tom, but the other Riverclan cats were already padding softly over to him. They crouched around his nest, whispering in his ears, murmuring that he was going to be okay.

Please, Starclan... if there's any hope for Houndspots, let our medicine cat sign come tomorrow.

Lagoonstripe didn't exit on time to assign the dawn patrol. Crescentsky watched the darkness inside the den grow paler and paler, as the light strengthened outside.

A/N:

Q: What do you expect to see play out/happen before the book ends?

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[image]

TWO DAYS LATER ◐

Crescentsky and Tinyflame were still confined to their nests in the warriors den. A dry, itchy scab had formed over most of the teeth-marks in Crescentsky's haunch, as well as the other wounds along her flanks, face and neck. Her tail-wound was still matted with old blood, and the missing patches of fur would take weeks to fully grow back. That isn't what troubled her most right now, though.

Houndspots passed from his wounds around early sun-high. Crescentsky and Tinyflame took a few weary steps past the den entrance together, to watch and participate in his vigil. After the tribute they both walked up and touched their noses to his cheek.

"Thank you for keeping my secret," Tinyflame whispered.

Crescentsky looked at her with quiet resonance, feeling regretful that she had forgotten to thank the tom herself. He'd never brought it up when they were healing together in the warriors den; most likely because he thought that Crescentsky didn't know. Tinyflame had never told him that it'd happened to her as well.

He held tight to Tinyflame's secret until the very end... He never told her she couldn't be a warrior because of her missing claws. What an amazing mentor. She wished she could say the words out loud.

Crescentsky's gaze then slid over to her chestnut sister, but she couldn't say anything right now out of respect for Houndspots.

Rowanpaw's been avoiding me for two days.

"Maybe there would've been a chance, if the medicine cat was appointed as soon as we got back." Tinyflame said when she stepped back, her voice thick with acrimony toward Starclan's lack

of urgency.

No cat had challenged her. In fact, a few of them had agreed.

Crescentsky felt that it was too late for Houndspots either way. The raging infection had plagued his body for over a quarter moon. His belly had been swollen, red, and weeping with a foul-scented pus. No cat had known how to keep the wound treated or closed.

The next morning, when Rowanpaw still hadn't come to visit, Crescentsky left a grieving Tinyflame in her nest. She stretched out her damaged hind-leg, pleased to find that the pain was sort of bearable as she paused at the den entrance.

"Since Rowanpaw won't come to me, I'm going to go to her."

Her sister waved her tail placidly, then cozied into her nest and stared across at Houndspot's empty bedding. Frowning, Crescentsky left Tinyflame and padded into the weak sunlight.

The clouds were layered thick today, coupled with a strong and gusty wind. The outside air was moist and rich. Crescentsky thought she could smell rain on the breeze, and the treetops that rocked together sent a few half-brown leaves spiraling down.

Leaf-fall is coming.

She needed this fresh air. She'd hardly left the warrior's den for the past two days, except to make dirt or eat or drink. Cheetah and Trufflefur had been offering to bury her and Tinyflame's prey bones, or replace their cobweb dressings.

"Hey! Where's Rowanpaw?" She called to Alpinefog, who was headed for the camp entrance and followed by Jadestar, Sootface, and Racoonstripe.

"I've sent her out hunting for the clan on her own. She's had a bad attitude all morning." The grey warrior studied her, glancing down at the raised hind-leg that was slathered in cobweb.

"Shouldn't you be resting, though?"

"I'll rest after I've spoken to Rowanpaw. It's important." Crescentsky didn't explain any further than that. She just slipped past the tom.

Although she meant no disrespect, she was a warrior now; and she had been resting for two days. She could *technically* do whatever she wanted; within the confines of reason, of course.

The dark tabby-and-white warrior felt at ease as she padded into the willow tree forest. The skies began to turn dark as they grew laden with rain. Some of the branches in the tree-tops clattered raucously against one another, and birds shrieked as they took off for shelter.

Her thoughts were intent on finding her avoidant littermate. Tracking the she-cat's scent was growing harder on the fitfull, tossing wind- but when she brushed her whiskers against the earth she could detect trace of it.

Rowanpaw's trail strengthened as Crescentsky approached a deep-channeled stream that was far into their territory. Trailing ivy stems and thick belts of clover sprawled underneath lush-leaved tree-trunks. She pushed through some unfurling stems of timothy grass and padded downslope to the wide babbling stream.

A few ducks were quacking in the water a long ways off. They dipped below the surface and then rose up again, flicking their shiny beaks and shaking their tails as if they were ecstatic to be there.

Crescentsky caught sight of her sister when she turned her head after hearing a huge splash. Rowanpaw was farther upstream, pulling herself out with dripping whiskers and a giant, wriggling carp in her jaws.

"Great catch!" The tabby-and-white warrior gasped with her ears pricked, impressed.

Crescentsky skittered over there to help her pin it. The fish was nearly as big as Tinyflame was. She pressed her forepaws against its gills, but drew back in shock as Rowanpaw spat at her.

"It's mine! Get away!" Her sister kept one paw on the fish, and one unsheathed forepaw raised defensively.

"I wouldn't have *stolen* it. I'm your littermate and your clanmate." Incredulous, Crescentsky tried to catch her gaze.

Her sister reeled back after giving the carp a killing bite.

"Oh, really? I thought you wanted to steal more glory for yourself," Rowanpaw growled, her yellow glare accusatory as she finally met Crescentsky's offended stare.

"What's the deal, Rowanpaw? Why are you acting jealous of me specifically?"

It took Rowanpaw a minute to respond. She seemed to be deciding what she wanted to say. Her gaze was lit with a fuming, rageful desire, as if she couldn't wait to do so.

When she finally broke the silence, her meow was spiteful.

"I'm not jealous. You get everything you want by breaking all the rules. And every cat lets you! Because they're just as foolish as you are," she said passively.

"So how can I be jealous of that?"

Wind tossed Crescentsky's neck-fur up and around her face. She blinked, taken off-guard.

"Then there's the cats like us," Rowanpaw carried on.

"Cats like me and Rainpaw, who follow the rules and get nothing out of it." As she kept speaking, the brown she-cat began to tremble and flatten her ears.

"No praise. No warrior name. No friends, or clan approval, or toms padding after *us!"*

What's she saying on that last part?

"Let me guess, you're slow on the uptake? Like I've always said,"

Rowanpaw crowed, a small smile playing on her muzzle. The insult caused Crescentsky's hackes to rise.

"You can't see that Trufflefur is being friendlier than he needs to be. Offering you prey and wanting to eat with you, or jumping on the opportunity to bury your prey bones."

All of a sudden her condescending grin turned into a sneer filled with disgust.

"That stupid Oatkit talks about you, too. Says you've done more to unite the clans than any other cat so far. And your desperate kittypet friend, *and* Tinyflame. She's always favored *you* over me." Rowanpaw began to stalk around her, taking long, slow strides, and flicking her tail back and forth as if she were annoyed.

"When all you've done is broken the rules." The brown she-cat shook her head.

"That's not-"

"Lagoonstripe and Alpinefog are such senile leader-figures, letting you keep your warrior name."

"So you want your warrior name." Crescentsky stated mildly, still fighting to keep her fur flat.

She doesn't really mean it. She's just jealous of what you've accomplished. She's your sister. Don't get angry.

A sister that doesn't know how *to be a sister*. Crescentsky took a deep breath.

"Look... I can give it to you, Rowanpaw. I can give you your warrior name."

She tried to let some excitement creep into her voice. One of the ducks quacked from farther downstream, nearly interrupting her.

"We can hold an assessment for you. Alpinefog doesn't even have to know until it's over. Racoonstripe and Emberfawn could come. I could get a few cats there to call your name. Cheetah would love to

come as well. I-"

Rowanpaw leaned forward, her fishy breath bathing Crescentsky's muzzle.

"I don't want an assesment from *you*. I don't need an assessment with all of *your* friends watching and cheering!" Her trenchant yellow eyes were narrowed.

Across the flowing grey water, bright yellow marigold grew in clusters along the topmost edge of the riverbed. They nearly matched the color of Rowanpaw's eyes.

"But why? I... we could-." Crescentsky was struggling to find the right words.

Or rather, to say them out loud.

I want my second littermate back. We used to be a trio, not a duo. I never pushed you out, did I? So where did all of these random grudges come from?

"Look, I can tell you feel strongly about this." Though it pained her to do so, Crescentsky prepared herself to say sorry for nothing.

"I'm sorry. Can't things be how they used to, when we were young kits? When we actually talked about stuff and-."

"Save it. I'm my own cat now. And I'm not going to pad around in your shadow."

Without another word, Rowanpaw ended the conversation, bending down to pick up her cumbersome carp. She padded off with its heavy corpse spilling from both sides of her jaws.

"I never said that you weren't." Baffled, Crescentsky reared back.

"And uh, why would you? What shadow?"

Crescentsky was frowning. *I sort of get it now, but I also don't.*

"So much for that," she muttered to herself. Tinyflame was right. It

was exhausting trying to figure out Rowanpaw.

Then her thoughts flew to something else.

I wonder if Trufflefur really likes me.

Was it wrong that she sort of wanted him to?

But he's a Thunderclan cat! And I've never thought of having a mate before, besides 'no thanks, not really my style!,' But... it's... Trufflefur...

She pictured his round, soft face and his friendly, cerulean-blue eyes.

He was outwardly friendly towards her in particular, but hadn't displayed any romantic feelings yet. She would have to get to know him better, and found herself excited at the prospect of it.

Trufflefur seemed like a cat that she could trust, a cat that she could share her secrets with. A cat that would support her to the end.

But really, she was getting ahead of herself. Rowanpaw had put these thoughts into her head.

I guess I'll just have to wait and see.

A/N: Thought-Provoking Questions

Q1: Do you think Rowanpaw's jealousy is justified, given how her sisters leave her out of everything? Or is that her own fault?

Q2: Do you want Nighthowl to make another appearance?

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[image]

[image]

Rowanpaw
(see more art like this on the Art Page)

Crescentsky was anticipating being bored in the warriors den again when she returned, so she decided that she would decorate shells today. She gathered a few on the way back to camp, and a couple of pretty leaves and tiny gleaming stones that she would attach to them.

She gathered the sap last, using her toes to crack off a piece of bark on the side of a maple tree. The tabby warrior dabbed a bit of it onto her pads, then swiped it on an uninjured part of her shoulder. She would carry it there and clean it off her pelt later, since she didn't have anymore room in her jaws for a leaf-wrap filled with sap.

When she made it back to camp she found that she didn't want to go back into the warrior's den just yet. Crescentsky wanted to stay out in the fresh air while it was still daylight, before the rain fell.

The Riverclan warrior knew that decorating shells was more of an apprentice hobby, and even then it was usually she-cats who participated in the activity. Although, according to her father's words- a young tom would sometimes make one for a she-cat if he particularly liked them.

It's better than being bored in the camp all day. It looks like everyone else is out on patrol anyways... That, or resting up before the night-guard shift. She searched for someplace that would stay relatively

dry when it began to rain.

Riverclan cats also occasionally used the shells during death vigils. Some cats had put aside the time and energy to make Houndspots one during the span of hours between his death and vigil. They'd been placed atop his grave after he died, as a marker.

I should make Tinyflame's shell first. She deserves one the most right now. She's going to be grieving over her lost mentor for awhile. And maybe it would help her get better soon.

Oh, yeah. There's a sheltered space behind the elder's den. It was shaded by a big mossy stone on one side. She remembered it now, as she turned her head to look around camp. When she found it, she approached confidently.

Bushy den walls shielded one side, while mossy rock created an enclave in-between them. Crescentsky stepped closer to the rock, rounding it with the assortment of items clasped tightly in her jaws.

But when she stepped around, she saw two cats lying there sharing tongues. She took a second-glance in order to fully realize who they were.

Her two smooth shells clattered to the ground. They landed in the flattened grass that created a pathway between her and the two other cats.

One of them was a deeper and richer brown than her chestnut sister, his jaw angled and his large blue eyes round with shock. The she-cat who'd been sharing tongues with him stood up quickly, disentangling her legs and tail from the tom's.

Rainpaw's eyes were wide and apprehensive while Crescentsky took a spacious step back. It felt like she had interrupted something.

Before, the two cats had been grooming one another's pelts with eyes full of love. Now their pupils were harrowing slits, and Rainpaw's fur was bristling in alarm.

"Sorry!" Feeling incredibly awkward, Crescentsky began to back away. She bumped into the leafy bush-wall behind her, then fully

turned around to try and go.

"Wait!" Rainpaw mewed urgently, halting her in her tracks. The gray she-cat's muzzle was creased into a frown.

"You won't tell anyone, will you, Crescentsky?" Rainpaw asked with a plea in her voice. Crescentsky waited there, one paw raised uncertainly.

"No, of course not. I won't tell anyone what I saw... But I should go." Her hindpaw was beginning to ache. And she was fighting flattening her ears.

So Rowanpaw was wrong. Trufflefur doesn't like me like that. He's just been trying to be my friend. A small echo of hurt sang her chest, but it faded quickly.

And he loves Rainpaw since... who knows how long.

Crescentsky still found herself feeling disappointed. Trufflefur and Rainpaw were both closer in age then him and Crescentsky were to each other, so it made sense- but it had felt nice to think that the mature young tom liked her as more than a friend. Even if just for a few moments.

"Can you promise?" Trufflefur asked, and she turned around uncertainly to sit down in front of them. Crescentsky began picking up her shell decoration materials, scooping them closer and plucking them from the grass with her teeth.

"Yes, I promise." She mumbled around the shells.

"But she could be lying. We don't really know her that well, and she's Riverclan."

"I don't think she would," said Trufflefur. Rainpaw was still looking at Crescentsky, until embarrassment made her pelt flush.

"I-... I can tell you as secret of mine!" She said in a hasty tone.

Deep down, Crescentsky knew that she was being reckless. Her heart began to pound as soon as the words left her mouth.

But she didn't want to leave it like this. If she told them, it would help gain their trust.

Both of the cats studied her closely, until Trufflefur finally nodded. His eyes gleamed as if he were bursting with the want to know.

"Uh, I-." Crescentsky paused as she wondered which secret she could tell.

Okay... well, not the wolf one. That's too jarring.

But can I really trust them with the truth about my claws?

She figured it was too late now. She would have to take the leap.

Her tail twitched as she fought to find the right words.

But there's not any. And so Crescentsky just blurted it out.

"I don't have any claws on my front paws. A Twoleg captured me and took them out, before I made the trip around the lake."

They were silent at first. Rainpaw's pelt lifted along her spine as if she were horrified.

"Really?" Trufflefur asked, his eyes widening. Some raindrops weighing down the foliage above them shivered and scattered water over their pelts.

Don't shake it off, Crescentsky thought. She settled for flicking the dewdrops from her ears instead.

"Yes." She lifted a white forepaw and spread out her toes to their full extent. No silver-tipped claws slid out. In fact, there was no sheathes at all.

"Out of all things, I didn't expect that."

"Wow. I hadn't known Twolegs could do such a thing." Rainpaw again looked horrified. Her mouth was pulled into a grimace, and she flattened her ears with sympathy, as if she felt bad for Crescentsky.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not anymore."

"That must suck, not being able to fight now. Besides just mock-battles for training." Crescentsky stayed silent for that one.

"Does anyone else know?" Trufflefur interjected again.

"Tinyflame and Cheetah," the tabby warrior admitted. She didn't mention the fact that Tinyflame's claws were taken as well.

"Can you still hunt?"

They asked her a few more questions, and Crescentsky was suprised to find both of them genuinely interested, and concerned.

"I understand why you don't tell the clan, trust me." Rainpaw said. Her look was clear and relatable.

"And we won't tell on you," Trufflefur reassured Crescentsky as the topic drew to an end.

"So why'd you come over here anyways?" Rainpaw murmured, pricking her ears as if curious. Her blue-gray pelt nearly matched the mist-covered drizzling sky.

"I wanted to decorate my shells somewhere that it would stay dry." She glanced at the withered vine canopy sitting high above their ears.

"Or at least, relatively."

"I wondered what those were for." Trufflefur said before twisting around to groom his back.

"That seems really neat," Rainpaw began.

"Skyclan has never decorated anything, except for the trees. As kits we climb as high as we can and then score the tree-trunks with our claws. The cat with the highest claw-marks wins." She peered over at Trufflefur partway through speaking.

"Well, that's not really decorating them. More like leaving wounds in them." He gave a lop-sided grin, and Rainpaw giggled, unoffended.

"It was *our* way of decorating."

"You did that with your littermates?" He asked, and the she-cat's amusement was cut short.

"Yes," she said, seeming to withdraw into her shy persona again. It grew quiet after that. Crescentsky thought she was remembering her fallen littermates.

"Well, I'm gonna leave you to it, Crescentsky." Trufflefur rose to his paws and leaned down, closer to Rainpaw. He touched his nose to hers delicately, and then slid his jaw along Rainpaw's, nuzzling her.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, my love. It's best that I go now, before some cat notices where the three of us have gone."

Crescentsky hunched her shoulders, feeling bad about the fact that she had inconvenienced their timely moments together. But Trufflefur gave Crescentsky a friendly nod as he passed.

"Thanks for keeping our secret, Cres'. I hope you know that you're still an asset to your clan, even without your claws. And you're a good friend."

Then the tom slipped from behind the stone discreetly. Both Crescentsky and Rainpaw watched him go.

A/N:
For anyone wondering (Trufflefur around 15 moons old) (Rainpaw currently 17 moons)

Trufflefur

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[image]

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"So you and Trufflefur, eh?" Crescentsky poked around at conversation as soon as he'd left. She let a bit of warm amusement creep into her tone.

"Yeah." Rainpaw looked down. The she-cat drew one of her claws in the dust.

"He's such a great cat," she sighed dreamily. "He sees and acknowledges the good in others. But this is part of why my mother doesn't trust me..."

Crescentsky pricked her ears.

"When did you guys get together?" She tried to sound like she wasn't all that interested to know, but really she was.

"About a moon before you came, I was sneaking off to Thunderclan territory to meet him. I waited until after sunfall, when my mother and Sootface were asleep."

Crescentsky looked at her for a moment. "Seems risky. Not just because they could've caught you, but because of the wolves and all," was all she could say. She didn't want Rainpaw to think that she had any opinions on their half-clan relationship.

Truthfully, she didn't. It was their business, not hers.

And when she really thought about it, love was love. The warrior code allowed for a clan change, but Jadestar would never agree to it- even if Trufflefur *did* want to join Skyclan as Rainpaw's mate. And so Crescentsky could see what predicament they were in.

"I was careful, at first. Trufflefur and I used the trees to travel most of the way, so that we didn't leave a scent trail or run the risk of

coming across a wolf." Rainpaw looked reminiscent as she peered toward the lush rowan leaves hemming in on one side of their secluded shelter.

"We made plans to see each other every few days, and only if the weather was well enough to do so. I covered his Thunderclan scent with sage leaves."

Crescentsky nodded as she listened avidly. She had never heard Rainpaw talk this much.

"But then I started being more reckless about it. I couldn't resist sneaking off to see him more often... it just felt like the gaps between seeing him got father and wider." The she-cat sighed.

"I was caught one night while returning. *And* I'd forgotten to cover the scent of Thunderclan tom on my pelt, so Jadestar didn't believe any of my excuses.

After that she began watching my every move. She even checks on me in the apprentices den throughout the night. In our old camp, and here, too. I've woken up and seen her peering through the entrance." The blue-gray she cat crossed her paws.

"So that's why Jadestar doesn't like Trufflefur. She knows it was him you had snuck off to be with."

"I admitted it to her, after she yowled at me and pried it out of me. But yeah, it was kind of obvious in the first place. Thunderclan scent; he was the only Thunderclan cat left. We had spoken to Trufflefur a few times on border patrols, so Sootface and Jadestar knew of him. And his personality always drew me in, even from afar."

Crescentsky mewed her understanding.

"My mother doesn't want to embarrass me or show any sort of disorder in front of the other clans, you see- as wild as that sounds." Her tone turned sour as a lemon.

Isn't that what she's been doing, though?

"So that's why she won't openly share why she doesn't like him."

Crescentsky nodded.

"...I've actually been wanting to ask you guys something. You and Tinyflame, I mean."

Crescentsky waited for her to continue, but when the she-cat didn't she looked down at her shells and asked "What is it?"

"Well... I wanted to know if you could give me my warrior name." Rainpaw then rushed to explain herself.

"I know I don't know you all that well, and you're a Riverclan cat and not Skyclan or a clan leader. But you're the only one who's come into contact with Starclan recently."

Despite that reasoning, Crescentsky was still put off by the proposal.

"Won't Jadestar and Sootface just revert it back to your apprentice name? They don't exactly like me, nor my ideas..."

"I'll make sure they know that it was my idea. They definitely won't like it, or agree with it, but if you and Tinyflame could do it then who's to say I can't?"

That was a different situation. And my parents aren't around anymore, like yours are.

But... I can't let her down. Not when she's looking at me like that.

Rainpaw's eyes shone with hope as a fat raindrop made its way through the hanging vines above them. It landed on her nose, causing her to sneeze.

"Well, then. Why not?"

"Great!" Rainpaw's tail lifted in delight.

"So how do we hold my assesment? How would I get some cat to judge my skills?"

Crescentsky studied her. She wished she could do it herself, but her wounds were still bothering her. Doing too much too soon wasn't worth the risk of infection.

Plus, Jadestar was always watching Rainpaw's every move. Especially out in the forest. It seemed like the only alone time Rainpaw ever got was when her mother left her behind in camp.

"I could sneak off," Rainpaw began, but Crescensky had already come up with a solution.

"I can be the judge of your assesment, if I set a task for you to complete. It won't be a test of examining your hunting skills but rather; what you can accomplish while using them."

Rainpaw's whiskers quivered with excitement. "Okay. Whatever it is, I'll do it."

"Next time you go out hunting-" Crescentsky heard indistinct voices passing by on the other side of the elder's den wall and lowered her voice. "-your test will be to catch two squirrels and two birds in our territory. That's all."

"Really? Do you think that's hard enough?"

"It's perfect." Crescentsky licked a forepaw and drew it over one ear as she explained herself.

"Riverclan is mainly maple and willow trees. Compared to Skyclan's oak and spruce trees, our trees are harder to grip, and thinner. Your Skyclan skills will aid you. It shouldn't take long to find and catch two squirrels in some hollowed-out willow tree trunks, but the two birds will be a harder task."

"That's brilliant. Thank you."

The two she-cat's eyes glimmered as they looked across at one another. Rainpaw looked so appreciative that Crescentsky began to feel embarrassed all over again.

"After you've done it, and your parents are away on patrol, feel free to visit me in the warriors den. We'll hold the ceremony then." It

felt weird to be telling Rainpaw this, especially since the blue-gray she-cat was older than her.

She could hear soft rain pattering against the earth. The Riverclan warrior felt a few misty droplets land on her back-fur, and quickly reminded herself not to shake off while she was in camp.

I have to return to Tinyflame soon. But first, she had to gather the rest of her stuff.

Crescentsky leaned forward and examined her shells for damage. There was no blemishes on either one. She bent down to begin picking up her crafts, and Rainpaw generously stepped forward to help.

"Wait, your leg is hurt. I can get that." The she-cat picked up a pink shell in-between her teeth, tail waving as she mumbled around one edge of it.

"I'd like to make a shell for Trufflefur as well, I think. Even though it's a Riverclan thing." Her eyes twinkled as she looked over at Crescentsky shyly, and the tabby warrior trilled.

"You totally should! Some cats use feathers or fish scales for decorating, too. My mother once used a pearl. She found it in a cracked clam at the bottom of a sandy stream."

"I don't know what a clam or a pearl is, but who'd she give it to?" Rainpaw sounded genuinely interested.

"My father, Everfrost. Before he died..." Crescentsky turned her face away.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's alright," Crescentsky mewed.

"If you want to, you can use one of the shells that I have here for Trufflefur. I can always gather more later."

Rainpaw nodded gratefully, and picked up the rest of the items. Crescentsky helped her finish, temporarily cutting off her speech as

they exited the space behind the elder's den.

The two she-cats made way for the apprentices den instead, an area that should be relatively cleared out for shell-decorating. Crescentsky kept her injured hindpaw raised high off the ground, but it still festered with a staunched agony.

I hope my wound isn't becoming infected. Rain fell across their backs and shoulders, while stormy grey clouds traversed the skyline above.

Rowanpaw was inside, and as soon as the she-cat saw them coming she began grumbling and headed for the exit. A dark look crossed her face as she passed Crescentsky.

Rainpaw tossed her a concerned look. Crescentsky found herself waving it off with a paw.

"Pay no mind." She sighed, still not knowing what she would do about it later.

I suppose I'll have to try and reconcile again. But it's so exhausting when the other side just wants to argue and point paws.

Rainpaw spat out the shell in her mouth, dropping a curled spotted yellow leaf and a smooth shiny rock beside it.

"You know, I realize now why Trufflefur likes you." Rainpaw gazed her over.

There was no jealousy in her voice, and clearly she'd meant it in platonic way.

"He looks for a friend in you because you're the most pro-active cat in Riverclan. You have a take-charge way of doing things. *And* you're clan oriented, but you don't want to influence or control in the ways that some other cats do."

"Thanks," Crescentsky grinned with her dripping whiskers twitching.

"The feeling is mutual."

"I'm going to look for some more items around camp real quick. Maybe I can find something like this beside the reed-beds." Rainpaw shyly poked at the azure rock with her forepaw, and Crescentsky smiled. She found herself wanting the she-cat to return and spend more time with her.

"Go ahead. I have to stay in here or the sap will wash off my shoulder. The drizzle already washed half of it off."

When Rainpaw returned, though, Crescentsky's heart sank to hear her newfound friend being called out of the den.

"Rainpaw! Come and share this squirrel with us." It was Sootface. And clearly, he had returned from their hunting patrol with Rainpaw's mother, Jadestar.

Crescentsky saw Rainpaw turn around with a disappointed expression. The she-cat dropped a few pretty striped pebbles that she had found, and a soft, downy duck feather. The feather flitted from the den behind Rainpaw's retreating hindpaws, disturbed by the rush of wind that her shuffling back legs kicked up.

Crescentsky made a grab for it, but the feather slipped out of her clawless paws. It lifted and twirled away on the wind as the she peeked around the edge of the den entrance.

She watched Rainpaw plodding toward the fresh-kill pile with her tail-tip dragging. Trufflefur was nowhere to be seen now, most likely hiding himself so that he wasn't seen too close to Rainpaw.

A/N:

Thought-provoking questions:

Q1: Do you actually want Crescentsky to have a mate one day, or is she better off without one?

Q2: Now that we know another reason why Jadestar is so protective of her only daughter, do you think she's justified since Rainpaw was previously sneaking off and lying to her?

64

[image]

"Hey Crescentsky."

Next mid-morning, Crescentsky was napping just inside the warriors den. The rain hadn't tapered off yet. Instead, it beat against the den walls with surprising force as she lifted her head.

"Lagoonstripe sent out an early-morning hunting patrol earlier, and I did it! I caught all of the prey, Crescentsky! Do you want to come see?"

Tinyflame woke with a start beside her. The little she-cat's nest was only a few mouse-lengths from Crescentsky's.

"What's this about?" Her sister sounded cross at Rainpaw's arrival. She'd been in the middle of a nap as well. Crescentsky thought that Tinyflame's deep chest punctures were taking longer to heal than her own injuries.

Guilt searing her pelt, she sat up and leaned over to give her a reassuring lick.

"Rainpaw just came to tell me about her assessment." She didn't bother trying to explain any further, and thankfully Tinyflame didn't ask.

"Oh. Well, you should've told me."

Despite her ire, Tinyflame stayed awake to watch, violet eyes staring across from the moss that was bundled up to her chin.

"I don't need to see the prey. I believe you," the tabby-and-white warrior told Rainpaw.

"Now, before I say the words to the ceremony let me make sure that I've picked a suitable name."

While she was speaking, Trufflefur walked into the den.

"You came!" Rainpaw turned around to touch noses with him, her tail quivering.

"Yes, but we must hurry. Sootface just went to the dirtplace, so he'll be back soon."

Tinyflame's eyes widened at that, and she looked around the gloomy den-space, but no other cat was there.

"I'm not picky, Crescentsky. As long as it sounds normal, I don't mind." Rainpaw sat down and curled her tail around her paws.

"You deserve more than that. You deserve a name that represents you." Trufflefur didn't hesitate when he said it.

The smooth den walls were a rich woody brown, since most of the structure was made from woven tree branches. They almost matched Trufflefur's auburn pelt, making him nearly indistinguishable. *His name certainly suits him.*

"I've got a few ideas. If I may give a suggestion, Crescentsky." Trufflefur padded close enough to whisper into her ear. He kept his voice so quiet that even Tinyflame couldn't hear, although she still leaned forward to try to.

"Rainpaw likes fighting. If I had known she was doing her assesment sooner, I would've offered to add in battle training." Crescentsky was faintly surprised.

"Don't let that shyness fool you. Her mother taught her in paw-to-paw combat well. Problem is, she doesn't get the opportunity to train with other young cats in order to show it.
So I recommend...."

🐈‍⬛ (*skip the boring ceremonial words that we all would skim over anyways)*

"I do."

"Then by the powers of Starclan, I now give you your Skyclan warrior name." Crescentsky was standing with her back straight while Rainpaw stood facing her proudly, blue gaze shimmering with gratitude and a gracious half-smile plastered across her face.

"From this moment on your name shall be Rainstrike."

Trufflefur stepped closer with a lovestruck look on his face. His ears were relaxed to the side, his head lowered with a purr in his throat as he looked at Rainstrike.

"Apart from seeing what you already are, I can see what you will become one day, Rainstrike."

Crescentsky took a step back. She felt that he was only seeing her. There was no other cats here in the den with them, as far as Trufflefur could tell.

"Don't let being trapped under your mother's paw stunt your spirit. Stay the way you are, but grow and change too. Let other cats see the *real* you, my dove." His voice grew husky, and Rainstrike stepped closer, twining her tail with his. She looked like she wanted to cry with joy, or relief- or both.

Crescentsky glanced at the den entrance. Although she was too happy for them to rain on their good graces, she couldn't help but worry about other cats walking into the den.

But Trufflefur and Rainstrike stepped away from each other quickly. Their breathing had increased when they'd been close to each other.

Their time together must feel more precious than most, since they can only get snatches of each other's affection.

"Thank you so much, Crescentsky. I'm going to tell my mother tonight, just before sunfall. She'll have no other choice but to let me sit guard for my vigil."

Trufflefur didn't look hopeful, but he gazed at Rainstrike with his tail waving fondly.

"As long as Jadestar lets you keep it, that's what's important. Maybe it'll help her learn to let you go a little." His tone sounded desperate.

"I wish I could stand guard beside you during your vigil," the tom's voice tapered off.

He's so in love with her. I wonder if I could ever be so in love with another cat. But then she figured she would never find herself acting so sappy.

"Tinyflame, please don't tell on us." Rainstrike broke the sincerity of the moment with a crest-fallen sigh.

"Oh, I won't snitch." Tinyflame's eyes were calm, but they also shimmered with amusement.

"This has been quite the show, but if you asked me I'd say never saw a thing."

Rainstrike purred at her gratefully. Trufflefur's short brown pelt was still slicked against his frame. Respectfully, he had refrained from shaking out his rain-laden flanks onto the others.

"We'll see each other soon." The tom reassured his mate, blue eyes brimming with tenderness.

Crescentsky knew what he'd really meant. Not just see each other across the Riverclan camp; see each other *alone* together, so that they could share tongues and twine each other's tails.

Trufflefur nuzzled the she-cat, and they took turns exiting the den separately.

"Hey!"

Rainstrike's muffled yowl sounded accusatory. She started reversing back through the den entrance, dragging something backwards by her teeth. Her shoulder muscles bunched and flexed with the effort.

"Ow! Not so hard!"

The voice was Oatkit's. The young tom kicked out feebly, with just

enough force to free himself but not hurt Rainstrike. The tabby apprentice was already so much larger than a 'kit' that he was surpassing Tinyflame in size.

"I heard everything you all said." He spoke up again snootily before Rainstrike could get a word out.

"I saw him crouched by the entrance. He jumped up and tried to run away before I could grab him! But I caught the little eavesdropping rodent."
Rainstrike didn't have any trace of malice in her tone as she spoke of her clanmate. She did sound cross, though, sitting down to block the exit with her body.

Oatkit's wet fur was spiky apricot in the dim-light.

"Why were you listening, Oatkit?"

Oatkit raised his head, his blue eyes sparking defiance.

"I want a ceremony too, that's why. I want to be named as an apprentice by Crescentsky!"

After some arguing, they came to the conclusion that two things were true.

Thing one; Oatkit wasn't going to be told no. He said he'd reveal Trufflefur and Rainstrike's secret, if he was.

"That's a dirty thing to do, Oatkit. Holding a secret ransom." Tinyflame lectured him and then grinned.

"You certainly know how to get what you want."

Thing two; Crescentsky would have to find a mentor for him somehow. Skyclan mentors were ruled out since Jadestar, Pepperpelt and Sootface were the only options there.

He would have to be trained by a cat from Riverclan... Which would be non-traditional and controversial.

Wouldn't that make his ceremony *and* his apprenticeship less legitimate?

She'd just have to accept that they didn't have the resources to care.

"Okay. I'll find you a mentor tomorrow, Oatkit. Meet me back in the warriors den when you get the chance. Just *don't* tell your mother yet."

A/N:

Thought-provoking Questions *(you don't have to answer them all, if any. Unless you want to; LOL!)*

Q1: What drama might you expect to see from the claws and/or wolf secret being revealed?

Q2: From who?

Q3: On the flip side, who will be Crescentsky's supporters?

65

[image]
[image]

The rain tapered off throughout the night. A warm, humid draft ruffled Crescentsky's ear-fur during mid-morning the next day. Emberfawn and Cheetah had a break from training and patrolling, so they were sitting close and chatting together.

Crescentsky had just devoured a tench
when Jadestar and Rainstrike padded into camp. They held no prey in their jaws, and were alone.

"Rainstrike. Seriously? I could've picked a better name than that."

"And why didn't you? It's not like you haven't had time to think of it!"

"Don't get drab with me, Rainpaw." Jadestar growled, but her daughter growled right back.

"Don't call me that. I deserve my warrior name. It's been six moons that I've been waiting, mother. I won't do it anymore."

"You will if I say." The Skyclan leader's ears went flat, but Jadestar flicked them straight again and softened her tone.

"Look. I'm not going to argue all morning. Give back the warrior name that Crescentsky gave you, and we'll talk about this later." The dappled grey she-cat approached the fresh-kill pile and hooked a chub with her paw, grimacing as she held it up and examined it.

"No!" Rainstrike turned and snarled into Jadestar's face so fiercely that her mother's whiskers blew back. The Skyclan leader dropped the chub.

"No? Seriously?"

"Starclan, help me control my temper," Crescentsky growled under her breath. The fur along her spine was starting to lift.

I'm not in Jadestar's position, but I don't think that I could ever act that way if I *had a daughter.*

She's never gonna stop disturbing the peace or get out of Rainstrike's fur, is she?

I have to say something.

She rose to her paws and began to approach them, but Rainstrike wasn't done yet.

"Don't make a scene-" her mother began, as Rainstrike spat and snarled, swiping at some creeping bindweed that was laden with dewdrops. Clearly it was her way of letting the anger out.

"You refused to let me take my warriors vigil last night. I'm taking this warrior name, and I'm finishing my vigil outside the camp *tonight!"* The young warrior's voice was strident.

"Whether you like it *or not."*

She stalked away. Her mother's apprehensive green eyes followed her every move. As Rainstrike made way for the apprentices den, tail twitching in fury, Jadestar called out to her again.

"Wait! We're expected on border patrol with Alpinefog."

"I don't want to go with *you*." Rainstrike's tail was swallowed up by the den's darkness. Jadestar eventually got up and followed her in. The last words Crescentsky heard them exchange was; "Calm down, Rainpaw. If it's really that big of a deal you can keep the stupid name, but you're not performing your vigil alone." Her voice was high-pitched in annoyance.

"My name is Rain*strike*! You know what? Nevermind. Just *leave me alone!"*

The Skyclan leader finally fell silent.

"I feel bad for Rainstrike. She never gets to be happy, or do what she wants," Crescentsky heard Emberfawn say.

Crescentsky decided that she wanted to perform Oatkit's apprentice ceremony outside, instead of in the stuffy warriors den.

"Let's go." She called him out of the den with a limp later that evening.

Tinyflame followed her. The little black she-cat's tail was waving. She seemed in better spirits after receiving her shell-gift.

"Crescentsky!" Cheetah raced over, her pawsteps pounding against the well-drained earth. She lept for a peaty mound of tall grass before reaching them, shredding the tips with her outstretched claws.

"Neat move," Tinyflame complimented their friend. For once there was no trace of sarcasm in her voice.

"Thanks. I've missed you guys in the apprentices den."

"Oh, Cheetah! I forgot to show you the shell that I made you. It's over here beside the den."

She'd put it there so that it wouldn't get stepped on. Plus, the sap needed to dry and harden in the sun, and it had been foggy for most of the morning.

Cheetah's tail bristled with excitement, and her eyes grew wide as twin moons before she squeaked, "You made me something!?"

"Yeah, Riverclan apprentices sometimes make shells and-"

She was interrupted as Cheetah leaned down and studied the shell. "That's amazing! *Wow*, Crescentsky! No cat has ever made me anything before; that is so nice. It's so pretty..." Her eyes glimmered as she stared at the shell admiringly.

"Now I need to make *you* one! I'm going to find some stuff right now. Be right back!" She dashed off, causing their fur to flutter in her wake.

"Hurry up, please! I want to know who my mentor is." Oatkit complained. Crescentsky had nearly forgotten that he was there.

"You should've had your apprentice name by now, Oatkit. You're almost bigger than I am." Tinyflame followed behind as they made their way to a secluded open space behind the leader's rock.

"Yeah, I know. I just passed nine moons old!" He spoke indignantly. "Why are we going over here, though?"

"It's so that no cat can interrupt us. Sootface is in camp right now, you know, and he's your deputy. He might not like Crescentsky giving you your warrior name."

"Should've had our leader do it herself then," he muttered scornfully.

"We agree completely." Crescentsky raised her head. She felt sympathy for the pale yellow tom. It was disarming to even her, saying the word "Oatkit" aloud and then looking over to see a maturing young cat standing there.

"He's only got a few moons left for training, as well. If he learns quickly."

Crescentsky didn't mention that he might be late on getting his warrior name. It would only make him resent Jadestar even more.

"Yeah, so my mentor needs to hurry it up!" Though he was rushing them, the yellow-orange tom grinned with his whiskers twitching friskily.

"You told him we were meeting him here, right?"

"Yes! He'll be here any minute now."

Crescentsky thought it was convenient how Oatkit automatically expected a tom-cat to be his mentor. She smothered a grin.

I was right. I knew he wanted a tom as his role model. And not Sootface, she mused.

Oatkit's excitement was contagious, as he kneaded his paws into the grass with a warm purr. His eyes were brimming with anticipation.

They heard the cat before they saw him. He passed around the coal-grey leader's rock with his tail lifted and his eyes shining with reverence.

"Emberfawn! I thought he might be a cool mentor." Crescentsky watched as Oatkit beamed. She loved how the tom was so unbiased towards the other clans.

"Really?" Tinyflame asked.

"Yeah!" Oatkit mewed.

"He's always doing something, so I never really get to talk to him, but I've always wanted to." Oatkit gazed at him with an excited grin.

"Raccoonstripe just likes to lay around when he's in camp. I feel like Emberfawn takes clan responsibility more seriously."

He sounds more mature than he usually comes across as. Oatkit really needed this.

"I can teach you whatever you want to know, Oatkit." Emberfawn rumbled. "The values of a warrior are all laid out at your expense. I only have one rule."

"What is it?"

"To be patient and positive while you learn, because I'll be learning with you." Emberfawn curled his tail and gave a hearty smile.

"I can do that!" Oatkit said, then wrinkled his nose.

"Unless I'm cleaning out old stinky nests."

"Don't worry, I'll do it with you each time. It doesn't have to be a

bad experience." Emberfawn looked at Crescentsky and then slow-blinked at her, as if giving her thanks. She did the same back.

I knew Emberfawn would love an apprentice. And he seemed to know as well that this was his only foreseeable chance at mentorship, at least for now.

Even though they're Riverclan and Skyclan, they're the only choice each other has. And that's perfectly okay.

"You both look pleased," Tinyflame chuckled. "I guess we chose well."

Oatkit's peachy-colored pelt was reflecting a sinking orange sun. It shone like fire in the dying light, as the soon-to-be apprentice cocked his head.

"Will I get to know Riverclan secrets?"

"Uh, well. I suppose a few of are unavoidable, yes," Emberfawn said with an amiable chuckle.

"I can't avoid teaching you how to fish, or where the best places for prey in Riverclan territory are. And our battle moves are likely to be different from Skyclan's techniques."

"Crescentsky! Please hurry and make me an apprentice now *please*!" Oatkit meowed loudly, and she jumped.

"Okay, but hush. Not so loud," she tried to stifle her laugh.

Crescentsky performed the ceremony in low, quiet tones. When Oatpaw's apprentice name came, they whisper-yelled it to him.

His ears were so pricked that they almost looked like they were escaping from his head. He kneaded the grass underpaw in elation.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you! Nobody can keep it from me now. And I'm going to tell my mom tonight, right before we go to sleep, so that she'll be too tired to argue."

I don't think that's how that works. Crescentsky suppressed a grin.

"Emberfawn, we're going out first thing tomorrow aren't we? So I can tour the territory?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"My first time away from Pepperpelt. This is going to be awesome, yay!"

"I'm sure she will still argue." Tinyflame spoke up.

"And Jadestar certainly will when she hears of it. That's two Skyclan cats that Crescentsky's named behind her back now."

Crescentsky shot her sister a look. *Don't crush his happiness. And if you disagreed with it, you should've said something instead of helping me pick his mentor!*

"I'm not saying it's wrong." Tinyflame caught her look and spoke up again, as Oatpaw lept up the leaders rock and began climbing it victoriously. Emberfawn harrowedly followed behind him.

"Uh, wait!"

"I think it was a good thing to do, Crescentsky. On both ends. Rainstrike was waiting for two seasons, and we only waited for half a moon."

🐈‍⬛ *on the 2nd day of more den-rest*

Before the darkness tucked them all into its cryptic embrace, and Crescentsky headed to her nest, she saw Rainstrike padding out of camp with her mother.

She must be heading out there to perform her warriors vigil.

Sootface watched them both with a disapproving expression from beside the warriors den. After a moment he lifted his chin and followed them out.

"You two shouldn't be alone out there. I'll protect you."

"Go back to the warriors den. I can protect my daughter." Jadestar turned and flicked a forepaw out so fast that it brushed Sootface's whiskers. Her claws caught the moonlight and glinted, before she sheathed them just as quickly.

Despite Sootface being the bigger and bulkier cat, he'd flattened his ears and stepped away at the first sign of Jadestar's aggression. He now cowered with his tail held close to his flank.

She didn't actually hit him. That was a warning.

Her own deputy and mate. Or... former mate, I guess. It seemed there was always some kind of controversy when it came Jadestar. Whether it be against her own clanmates or Riverclan's warriors.

"She's my daughter too," he muttered, but the tom sounded more hurt than anything.

When it was beyond clear that Jadestar wasn't going to respond, Sootface lumbered away with his shoulders hunched.

Jadestar

66 🌙

[image] [image]

Guess the Characters
(!Revealed Next Chapter**!)**

*(*hint, not all r Riverclan*)*

Crescentsky had somehow found herself hiding yet another secret. And it was keeping her awake late into the hours of the night.

Her festering haunch-wound. It throbbed with a deep, agonizing fury. All of the other ones were tolerable at best. But she was pretty sure that her torn leg now hosted infection. The scab that'd grown over it had turned a greenish-grey, and pus was oozing up along the cracks. If she put her nose really close to it, she could smell a fetid odor.

I really thought it was going to heal. Crescentsky sighed. *Lying here resting didn't do me any good. What I really needed was infection-preventing herbs.*

I wish I could leave camp. She wanted to find more answers. She wanted to use her power again before the wolves came, not be thrown into the brutality of another fight blindly, after nearly a quarter moon of no preparations.

Her thoughts were scrambling like a trio of trapped mice. Her and Tinyflame were supposed to have told their clan-mates by now. Yet how could they, when they had none of the answers that their clan would inevitably ask?

The wolves will return soon. Maybe tonight if we're unlucky. I have to be ready, no matter what.

You know what? Her inner voice challenged.

Whatever! If I can't get treated tonight or tomorrow then what's the point in sitting here?

So I can wait to die? I'm going anyways.

She lifted herself up from her flattened mossy nest, careful to keep the infected haunch lifted.

It didn't seem to matter. She hissed and clenched her teeth, fighting to suppress a yowl.

It's definitely gotten worse over the past two days!

She didn't bother telling Tinyflame or Cheetah. It would only worry them into following her, or worse- stopping her.

Crescentsky tiptoed around her clanmates nests, narrowly avoiding outstretched paws and tails. Her shallower injuries felt itchy and tight as they were stretched along her skin, but they only truly hurt if they were grazed along something.

The Riverclan warrior would have permanent scars along her chin and muzzle forever, but she didn't mind. Maybe they would compliment her weird-looking eyes.

After the switch she padded through the forest with her mind boggling from the experience. It still felt new and unsettling to be walking around at such a high stature. Her paws rustled every leaf and snapped every twig.

But what reason does a wolf have to care?

And yet, her vantage point was also her weakness. It was harder to look ahead while knowing where she was putting her paws down below. They felt too wide-spaced and versatile, as she zig-zagged in a slow loping pace between shadowy willow trees. Crescentsky lowered her head until her long muzzle was nearly touching the ground. Her lope fell into a more natural rhythm.

The Riverclan warrior slowed to a halt and shook out her fur again, changing within the span of a tail-flick.

Then she changed back, shaking out her fur again and again and again. She couldn't actually feel herself shrinking down or growing larger, no matter how hard she tried. She could not find any sort of existence between one form or the other. The morph was instant.

The action didn't slow down or weaken her. Crescentsky's breath increased in the slightest from the exhilaration, but that was all. Nothing happened to her, save for the coherent effect of feeling dizzy; from such a fast and repetitive height change. Even after her head was whirling she kept doing it, trying see if there was some sort of exhaustion point. She only stopped at the electrifying pain in her haunch.

How did Starclan do this? Is it so simple as giving a life? She tried to glimpse silverpelt past the outreaching tree branches, standing there in the body of her wolf.

Then the Riverclan warrior sped off in the moonlight night. She came to the conclusion that she couldn't properly gain speed here, and so she made way for the other side of the widest-flowing river in their territory, which led into the marshes. All the while, her hind limb pulled up and resting just beneath her belly, where it could not graze or drag along the earth.

Crescentsky soon realized that she couldn't breathe properly in order to get enough air while she ran. At first she slowed down, confused but greatful to put less strain on her haunch anyways. When she broke into the marshes she sped up again, opening her mouth and streaking through the wet ryegrass. Crickets jumped away from her barreling paws.

When she'd opened her mouth, her tongue had instinctively flopped out, and now she could draw in huge panting breaths. Her large lungs expanded easily, accommodating all the air that she needed to take in.

Oh, duh. I should've just panted. Cats often did just that, if they were in overbearingly hot weather.

Crescentsky drew up short as fresh cat scents flowed across her muzzle. Their mingled foreign scents were blowing straight towards

her.

What's a group of loners doing out on the edge of our territory after sunfall?

Her fur prickled. She was caught off-guard and didn't know how to proceed. Initially, Crescentsky just stood there.

Oddly enough, one smelled slightly familiar, yet untraceable- while the other two were unknown to her. She caught sight of them when she lifted her dark head high above the surrounding landscape. They were walking in single-file with their heads bowed, tails sweeping the grass.

They look exhausted.

Crescentsky shook out her fur in order to change back quickly. Then she stepped forward, keeping her gait smooth and controlled.

I can handle them, whoever they are. They can't hurt me.

When she got close enough, Crescentsky realized she recognized the small throng of cats. At the lead was Nighthowl, and just behind him trekked Velvetpaw and Wolfpaw.

Crescentsky could tell that both of the apprentices had long surpassed warrior age. Velvetpaw was a soft-looking gray she-cat. She held her chin and tail high with an air of confidence. Not a single nick was etched along her ears, nor a scar carved anywhere on her shiny velvet pelt.

Wolfpaw was a grey-blue tom ticked with white. There were darker tones on his legs and tail. On the contrary to Velvetpaw, he had several gnarly scars along his neck and back.

The earth was so muddy under-paw that it sucked at Crescentsky's legs as she tried to take a step. Pain shot up her damaged haunch with every footfall. As she approached them, Nighthowl raised his voice in order to be heard over the chirruping crickets in the marshlands.

"Hello there. Are you happy to see me?" The shaggy tom asked with

a hopeful disposition.

"I'd sooner say the opposite, actually, and I barely even know you."

"What's a Riverclan cat doing alone on the edge of her territory at night?" Wolfpaw spoke up, his voice curious and chary at the same time, as if he were warning her that that it was dangerous.

Crescentsky didn't bother to answer that. "A better question is why are you on my territory?"

"Woah, sorry. I meant no disrespect. I'm sure you can handle yourself." His eyes glittered as he looked over at her.

"We were chased from our dens tonight," Wolfpaw carried on swiftly. His silver pelt was stained cyan under the blue-tinged moon.

"The wolves have been coming closer and closer to our camp at the foot of the mountains. They're all growing skinnier and hungrier. Tonight they found our camp and trapped us."

"Oh. And...?"

Velvetpaw hissed at him when a brief silence ensued.

"Tell her how we got away, genius!"

"We got away by waiting for the right moment, then making a run for it."

Velvetpaw curled her lip. "I wish they'd just starve to death already. It shouldn't take this long."

Nighthowl kept trying to meet Crescentsky's gaze.

"It was a good camp, for awhile. But the hunting was getting harder with leaf-fall coming. We thought we could join you guys, and of course we'll help with the hunting and wolf-battling." It was the most genuine she had ever heard him.

"It's not any one cat's decision, but we *do* need extra paws. And

you're clan cats. So follow me." She began to guide them.

Something felt off, though.

I remember Nighthowl mentioning that rebuilding the clans was a "false dream." So why'd he come here of all places? Why not flee the lake for a safer way of life, instead of coming here?

"I won't. I'm not risking my life," Velvetpaw said, flicking mud from her paws.

"What?" Crescentsky questioned. She'd been distracted by her own thoughts.

"*I* won't fight against the wolves. They killed all of my kin, besides Wolfpaw. You can't beat them. You can only *outrun* them."

Hearing such a thing caused Crescentsky to wither, but she also felt a little taken aback at how bluntly it was mentioned.

"I'm sorry, Velvetpaw. That sounds horrible."

"Well, you should be. It was. But I don't need your pity."

"Can't you be kinder, Velvetpaw?" Wolfpaw rolled his eyes, but his sister ignored him.

"I'm sorry... Crescentsky, isn't it?".

"Yeah. Uh, it's okay." She glanced at her paws airily, then back up at the tom.

"How'd you know my name?"

"Nighthowl. He spoke of you on the way. Quite kindly, might I add," Wolfpaw swished his tail and laughed.

Brilliant.

As they crossed back over the path that Crescentsky had used in the pelt of the wolf, Velvetpaw lifted her head.

"Smells like wolf over here, too. And it's fresh. They still hunt on the

clan's territories?"

"Yes," the Riverclan warrior answered quickly.

"We'd better be careful, and hurry along." Nighthowl said. He pricked his ears and tasted the crisp night air. Crescentsky copied him.

"Didn't you notice her injuries already? They smell of infection." Wolfpaw asked, stopping beside Velvetpaw and elbowing her in the ribs.

She hissed as she drew away from him. "Of course I did, you fat frog-brained oaf!"

Wolfpaw gave a big hearty grin, because clearly she had not.

"What I always wonder is, why wouldn't they just leave, if they're starting to starve and it's only just leaf-fall? There has to be better prey for them beyond our borders. Something to sustain them for longer," Crescentsky thought out loud.

"Why don't any of us leave? Multiple reasons," Velvetpaw sounded snarky.

"Bet you can't list one." Wolfpaw crowed.

"Fear of losing our contact with Starclan."

"That's already happened," he responded.

"Fear of the unknown and what's out there. Having no leaders to guide us. Being a shell of a clan with less than even five warriors. Should I go on?"

"Yes, but the wolves don't have any of that either. As far as we know."

"Shut it!" The gray she-cat snapped.

"I'd rather they starve and die where they stand," she said nastily.

"I want to watch them suffer like we have. They might find other cats to kill and hunt along their travels, whether they live here or go somewhere else!"

Nighthowl threw her a glance and then slowly nodded.

"Yeah." He paused in their walking to have a good stretch.

"I just can't wait to reach a safe nest, where I won't be potentially killed in my sleep." The Shadowclan tom straightened and turned toward Crescentsky, winking before he walked on.

"Would you mind sharing your nest in the warriors den with me? I'll be awfully too tired to make myself one when we get there."

Nighthowl didn't meet her gaze this time, probably to avoid the rejection that he would find there.

Wolfpaw and Velvetpaw were looking at them. Crescentsky felt heat flush her pelt, and snapped out "There's unused nests in the apprentices den and the warriors den."

And nobody even said you could stay!

"We're of warrior age. We just don't have our names yet." Wolfpaw interjected. The tom had a stubborn-looking tuft of hair sticking up atop his forehead.

"I figured as much," Crescentsky replied mildly. She studied him from the corner of her eye.

His thick build wasn't all just fluff. He had strong, lean legs and primed muscles. And the tom's head and shoulders were up to hers.

"Why are you side-eyeing him for so long? If anything, I'm the cat to look at."

Crescentsky couldn't help herself. She visibly rolled her eyes and snapped her head in the other direction, determined not to look at either of them.

Starclan protect this tom, because I'm going to kill him!

_____

Wolfpaw & **Velvetpaw** *(Kin siblings)*

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[image]

Character reveal

Which one did you guess right?

"Haha! You're such an embarrassment, Nighthowl." Velvetpaw tossed her head back while she laughed.

"Pathetically hopeless. You act like any she-cat will want you in the way that you want them." She glanced over at Crescentsky passively before prancing on ahead.

Now that none of the other cats were watching, she let her paws drag. All except the injured one, that is.

I'm so exhausted. And my leg is throbbing... Now I wish I would've stayed in camp, the tabby-and-white warrior thought. They padded on until the marshes dwindled off into dryer terrain. Tall bluegrass swished in the breeze, tugged this way and that by the fitful evening wind.

🐈‍⬛■

"There's a lot going on in Riverclan's camp right now. We haven't got a lot of cats, despite Jadestar's and her company." Crescentsky explained after they passed through the narrow pathway entrance. Fallen leaves littered their path. They hadn't been cleared by the warriors yet.

The two stationed guards began trailing behind Crescentsky and the Shadowclan arrivals. Clouds parted, and the moonlight returned by

the time she made it to highrock. Crescentsky sat down at the foot of the overhung stone, curling her patchy-furred tabby tail around herself in the shadows. The Shadowclan cats all followed her and settled in the stone's shadow as well.

"Crescentsky is definitely the type of cat to leave camp unannounced and show up at the entrance with some sort of crazy news."

"Especially in the middle of the night!" Racconstripe replied, stretching his jaws in a massive yawn.

"Did you even know she was out there? I don't remember seeing her leave."

"No," Emberfawn shook his head, grinning.

Wolfpaw shot Crescentsky a sly grin. "Guess that means she snuck out. Was it the good old dirtplace ditching method?"

By now the cats in the nearby warriors den had awoken to the sound of voices. Some were still blinking sleep from their eyes. Crescentsky found herself sitting beside a languid Raccoonstripe, Jadestar, and Rowanpaw. Darkness shrouded the foliage surrounding Riverclan's camp.

She addressed the three new arrivals with her tail held high.

"Some of the dens haven't been repaired yet, and the medicine cat's den is completely out of use. Riverclan's barrier needs repairing and-"

"We can see all of that." Velvetpaw cut in flatly.

"Uh- And..." she faltered. Crescentsky hadn't expected such an obnoxious interruption.

Alpinefog spoke up for her. "And we don't have a leader. Eveningstar and Smallsparrow died awhile ago."

"We figured. Which means Jadestar is the only leader left around the lake." Velvetpaw sat down and began grooming her paws.

A cloud passed over the thin sliver of moon, plunging the entire camp into darkness and causing all of their eyes to glow when their heads turned.

"Riverclan is waiting on a Starclan sign for their new medicine cat. Supposedly," Sootface told them, pushing his way to the front.

"Oh. That's good." Was all Nighthowl said.

"Sorry. We find it hard to care for the clans anymore- in particular Starclan, after they've done so little to help us." Wolfpaw explained, his gaze unbiased as he studied all of the Riverclan and Skyclan cats.

"What do you expect to gain from coming here tonight, then?" Jadestar asked.

"Our camp was invaded," Nighthowl began.

"We want refuge and a safe place to stay. *I* want to eventually strike out on my own, if Darkflower doesn't turn up- but at a time when it's more convenient. Leaf-fall is just around the riverbend." He turned his head to survey his audience.

"Plus; wolves killing cats around the lake, you see," he chuckled.

"Oh, we know all too well," Crescentsky shot back. "Seeing as how we stayed here, even after the other clans disbanded or left." *Including yours!*

For some reason, his joking attitude never seemed to amuse her. Moreso the opposite, in fact.

"It's like we told that kittypet she-cat three quarter moons ago. We haven't got the authority to tell you yes or no." Quietdew grimaced as she said it.

"But if you ask me, I don't want you stinking Shadowclan cats here. Whether you smell more like loners now or not!"

"Calm yourself, Quietdew." Lagoonstripe cut a path through the tight knot of cats surrounding Crescentsky.

"Of course they can stay. But they'll have to hunt, patrol, and stand guard in their turn like everyone else. They'll be risking their lives by staying, just as they would be in going." She blinked.

"Velvetpaw, Wolfpaw, isn't it? If I'm remembering correctly."

The two nodded.

"You've since surpassed the age of twelve moons old, so you'll be treated the same as any Riverclan warrior. I expect no less of you."

"I can help teach you how to fish," Cheetah cut in.

"See?" Rainstrike cut in just then, her voice confident yet rebellious. Her accusatory tone was aimed toward her mother.

"Those cats aren't treated like apprentices! Or *kits!"*

Jadestar scoffed, but she said nothing. Crescentsky was about to head to her nest, but Oatpaw spoke up with another interjection.

"I'm not a kit either. I'm training with my new mentor Emberfawn tomorrow. You can't stop me from leaving camp again for another day!"

"Hush. Now isn't the time to discuss it!" Pepperpelt hissed. Her speckled gray fur was starting to bristle up in annoyance.

The Riverclan warrior's heart sank. She'd really thought that Pepperpelt might see her son's enthusiasm and let him be trained under Emberfawn.

I'm gonna have to step in about that. Just not right now. Her eyelids were practically forcing themselves shut.

Crescentsky felt mentally drained. Like she was in the middle of the clan's banter all too often, and that for once she needed to take a step away from it. Cats were practically yowling into her ears.

"You deal with it from here. I'm getting some sleep. My wound hurts," she muttered into Lagoonstripe's ear.

"Crescentsky, wait. Why were you out of camp after sunfall? You know it's dangerous, especially for a lone warrior who's still injured!"

"I just needed some fresh air." Anxiety cascaded down to her paws as she told the lie.

"Then why did you sneak out? You didn't tell any cat, or ask them to go with you. And from the sound of it, you went pretty far!" Lagoonstripe narrowed her forest-green eyes, trying to meet Crescentsky's gaze.

"What do you need, Tinyflame?" The tabby warrior yowled and looked around Lagoonstripe's shoulder, but her heart sank as she did so. She trudged away quickly, acting like she hadn't heard her.

"Wait! I'm worried about you." The cat who'd been her mentor's voice receded into the background.

Another one. The tabby-and-white she-cat stifled a sigh.

I can't keep lying to my clan. The disloyalty was plaguing her ability to interact with her clanmates openly.

Crescentsky fought off the tension that was threatening to tie knots in her belly. She hoisted her throbbing hind-leg higher off the ground, daring not to glance at the inflamed, tender bite wound.

Ugh. No more of this. I don't care if we don't know all the extremities yet!

As soon as I wake up, I'll let Tinyflame know.

I'm telling the clan tomorrow.

"Roll over for a second. I need to check those injuries."

Crescentsky was woken early the next day, as Lagoonstripe poked and prodded through her fur to find and examine her wounds. The light wasn't very bright in the den-space, but by the vigorous amounts of sniffing that Lagoonstripe was doing, her main concern seemed to be rooting out infection.

She sat up and leaned back. Worry was shimmering in the warrior's emerald gaze. Then she pointed with her tail to the wound on Crescentsky's haunch.

"That smells of infection. And you're warm to the touch. If you don't get it treated you could lose the use of your hind-leg."

The bracken in Crescentsky's nest crinkled as she sat up abruptly. The pang of fear she felt only worsened her hot, aching forehead.

"There's nothing we can do except trust in Starclan. Surely they intend to send us the sign today," Lagoonstripe began soothing her.

"Do Tinyflame's wounds smell clean?"

"Yes," Lagoonstripe replied evenly.

"It's yours I'm most concerned about. But you'll be okay." She swiped her tongue over the space between Crescentsky's ears.

"You wouldn't *need* to be concerned about either of us if Starclan had gotten a move on," Tinyflame growled. She was often irritable in the mornings.

"Speaking of Starclan, we need to talk." Crescentsky muttered into her sister's ear-fur.

Lagoonstripe leaned closer, ears pricked. "What was that?"

"Nothing," Crescentsky meowed tonelessly, in a way that invited no more conversation.

Ugh. I'll have to discuss it with her later.

Lagoonstripe flicked her tail. "Sure. Now come with me. We're going to clean your wounds and replace your cobweb dressings."

Thought-provoking Question:

Q1: *Do you want Windclan to play a more involved role in book 2?*

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[image]

(Who r these cats if u know?)

When Lagoonstripe finally left her alone, the dark tabby-and-white Riverclan warrior started her day with a slow groom that stretched far into the break of dawn. When her pelt was shiny and gleaming, she stepped out of the den stiffly and made for the fresh-kill pile.

Crescentsky said a sparse hello to the other cats mingling around camp. She felt worse off than she had yesterday.

She was still confined to Riverclan's camp walls. Especially since Lagoonstripe now knew that one of her wounds smelled of infection.

The tabby warrior was cleaning the festering injury in the pebbly creek-bed, lowering herself to submerge the red welts with clean river-water, when Rainstrike approached.

"Hey! Guess what? Caught a minnow yesterday. I know, it took me forever. I tried it and it didn't even taste that bad." Rainstrike laughed.

She seemed more confident now that she had already established a friend in Crescentsky.

I like this version of Rainstrike- where she isn't so subdued, hiding behind her mother and afraid to say what she thinks.

"That's great," Crescentsky purred enthusiastically, tail waving.

"So, I was just wondering." Rainstrike gave an almost sort of sly grin as she pried.

"Do you like either of the young toms in your clan? Emberfawn and Raccoonstripe— is that their names?"

Crescentsky explained that no, she didn't.

I don't really think about things like that, anyways.

"I've never had a crush on any other cats. I feel like I'm more focused on clan type of ambitions."

"I'm sure the right cat just hasn't come along yet."

"Maybe," she said.

"I hope I have kits one day. Not right now obviously, but after I'm older and the clans have moved to new territories." Rainstrike sighed dreamily, and Crescentsky giggled.

"Trufflefur said you liked fighting. I wouldn't expect such a thing of you," the Riverclan warrior chided.

"Why not? And I do," Rainstrike retorted. She splayed her paws and crouched, flattening her ears in a mock-fight.

"Because you'd be confined to the nursery and out of action for a while, wouldn't you?" Crescentsky asked.

Rainstrike brushed that off with an amiable paw movement. "Nah, I would just make my mate kitsit while *I* fight in the battles. I could still patrol and hunt, too. When the kits aren't hungry.

But as soon as you're healed, it's on! It would be fun to fight a cat as big as you. Sootface always goes easy on me."

Crescentsky grinned. "I won't go easy on you. Just you wait!"

Rainstrike straightened, and Crescentsky took the opportunity to ask her a question.

"Have you ever thought about becoming leader one day? Like your mother."

"No. I don't want any of that responsibility stuff. I think being a warrior is just great." Crescentsky nodded.

"Well I have. And I do."

"Why?" Rainstrike's asked her to elaborate.

"I know it would be a lot of responsibility, but after I'm older and I've grown with my clan a little bit more, it would be great to make the right decisions for the benefit of Riverclan. *And* the other clans around the lake." She focused her gaze on the river's shimmering surface.

"Besides, it's not as if you would lead a clan alone. You'd make final decisions, sure, but your medicine cat and deputy would be there with you every step of the way. Somehow, I like the idea of being such an integral part of the clan, but also the fact that my clanmates can console me on what's best for Riverclan; just as well as I can console them. Being a leader, to me, sounds like being the heart of the clan. Your clan should trust you, and should they do so; then you would have a true family rather than just clan-mates."

Oops.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to give you a speech."

"It's alright." Rainstrike was studying her. Her whiskers twitched as her eyes shone with intrigue.

"Clan life sounds like your calling, despite your missing- well, you know." Rainstrike clipped her own voice and peered around the sunlit-lavished greenery edging Riverclan's camp. A couple of cats were sunning themselves close by.

The conversation carried on briskly, as Crescentsky and Rainstrike relaxed beside the paw-deep creek bed. Nobody had heard them.

Cattails twitched and swayed in the breeze, while thick swathes of tall-growing reeds threw a cool belt of shadow across the latter half of their backs. Some red-brown leaves were tugged across the earth by the wind, then thrown up into a swarm near the bottoms of tree trunks. Leaf-fall would soon befell them, and Crescentsky was grateful it was still warm.

"I'll catch a *real* fish eventually. It's just hard because my paws are

smaller for climbing along the tree-trunks of Skyclan's oak trees."

Some Riverclan cats had extra dewclaws for gripping the slimy fish that they pulled from the waters. Crescentsky was not one of them. Racoonstripe had extra dewclaws though, including odd-looking ones on his back paws.

Tinyflame's paws are smaller as well, and she's always struggled with gripping the bigger fish. Crescentsky thought, about to open her jaws and reply.

Rainstrike's paw broke through the shallow water as she brought it down, swiping at the minnows. The splash that it created made an arc for Crescentsky's face.

Don't shake it off don't shake don't shake don't shake. If only her pelt weren't practically itching for a shake-out right now.

"My bad!"

"It's alright. I can teach you how to fish when I'm healed, by the way." Rainstrike pricked her ears as Crescentsky went on.

"Has Jadestar given up arguing against your warrior name yet?"

"No." The blue-gray she-cat's expression turned sour. She backed away from the glimmering water.

"Jadestar won't let me out of camp alone still. I'm not allowed to stand guard by myself..." Rainstrike lowered her voice.

"And I *still* can't see Trufflefur alone, unless it's in camp and no cat is watching."

Crescentsky bent forward to take a drink from the lapping waves. A few threatened to ripple over her muzzle.

"So nothing but your warrior name has changed?" She asked when she was satisfied.

"Yeah, exactly." The she-cat sat down in a huff, gazing at her paws bitterly.

This is getting so old. I'm sick of it, which means she has *to be.*

Crescentsky turned her head in order to search for Jadestar's mottled-grey tortishelle pelt. When her gaze landed on the Skyclan leader, she found that Jadestar had already been watching them.

Surely she can't want *her daughter to sit there and suffer. Whether it be mentally or physically.*

"I'm saying something." Crescentsky rose up and stalked toward the she-cat on determined pawsteps.

"This has gone on for too long."

Rainstrike flattened one ear uncertainly, but did nothing to stop her.

"Quit robbing your daughter of the rights that clan life has to offer." Crescentsky lifted her head and snapped.

"Being a warrior is about responsibility, but also freedom. Freedom to help and serve your clan, to pick and have a mate, and to choose the cats that you get to be around!"

Jadestar blinked a few times, clearly taken aback. She had been sharing tongues with Pepperpelt beside a clump of gorse while watching them.

"You have no right to lecture a clan leader!" Pepperpelt snapped. The speckled grey she-cat was on her paws now.

Crescentsky's ears flattened. "A cat as blind as a mole could see that Rainstrike never gets to be happy!"

"Pepperpelt's right. Get on with you. Junior warriors in Riverclan have no authority in telling me how to run my clan.

And you had no right trying to name Rainstrike and Oatpaw behind my back, either. Don't think I don't know."

Jadestar curled her lip, a growl lacing her tone. She made to step around Crescentsky.

Crescentsky blocked her way, so that they were nose to nose now.

"You don't just get to walk away this time. Not until you make equal allowances for Rainstrike." The Riverclan warrior raised her voice.

"The same ones that we all have! Yourself, and Sootface! And the Shadowclan apprentices. And me! You're hindering your own clan. Skyclan will die out this way. You're-"

The breath was knocked from her lungs as Sootface carried her off her paws. Tinyflame appeared from the dirtplace entrance just then, her face aghast before she raced up to them. The she-cat started spitting.

"How dare you! Get away from my sister!"

Sootface backed off immediately, his tail low and swishing as he fought to flatten his bristling fur. Crescentsky was still lying on the ground, stunned and getting her breath back.

"How dare *she*! I just wanted her to shut her mouth!" His growl was loud and defensive, but the dark tom glanced nervously around the clearing, as if he was scared of being reprimanded.

"She's injured!" Tinyflame rebuked. "And this is *our* camp."

Crescentsky finally stood up, swaying for a second on her lame hind-leg. By now, other cats who were still in camp were watching the scene. Oatpaw was held back by his mother's tail, which he could've easily hopped over.

"Stop fighting my battles for me!" Jadestar yowled, stepping in-between them.

"But I'm your deputy..." It seemed Sootface wanted to say more, gazing across at Jadestar pleadingly. Crescentsky took that chance to jump in.

"You two can't run your clan together. And that alone is affecting ours." She stayed where she was, narrowing her eyes at Jadestar from afar.

"I can run whatever Starclan puts in front of me to run!" The leader snarled. She raked her claws into the ground, lashing her tail. Clearly taking it personal.

"I'm sick of living with Riverclan. Cats throw a fit over the littlest things. Nobody here can take orders, there's no real structure or else the dens would've been repaired by now, and for some reason there always has to be drama.

As if we don't have enough of that from the wolves alone!" The fur along her neck was risen twice past its flattened height.

"It is *not* wrong to protect my last surviving kin, nor Pepperpelt's of her own accord," she snapped.

"It is not wrong to preserve what's left of Skyclan!" She yowled. "And just because my ways are different—"

Jadestar was interrupted by a thunderous, clamorous boom as lightning split the air between all of the standing cats. Its beam of electricity hit the ground mere fox-lengths from Jadestar's paws. Crescentsky saw radiant, blinding light reflected in the eyes of all of the cats facing toward her.

At first nobody spoke. The variable pulsating rod was gone quicker than it had reached down and zapped into the earth.

The cats who were closest to its strike zone, like Jadestar and Tinyflame, had spiky fur standing straight out on one side of their bodies. A whoosh of heat from the shockwave had blown some of their whiskers back.

"Great Starclan-... What?" Jadestar's jaws were still open from her previous sentence, and she didn't try to close them now. Her gaze was disbelieving as she started at the spot where the lighting had struck.

Crescentsky was doing the same. The image of the fizzling white line was still ingrained into her vision. She blinked a few times, still shocked by what she had seen. Her ears were ringing, so that the gasps and mewls of fright from the surrounding cats were fading in

and out.

Crescentsky bent her neck to look up at the sky. There was no stormy grey clouds, no fitful fallen rain. Nothing that you would expect to be accompanied by a lighting strike.

Thankfully, her hearing returned quickly.

"What was that?"

"But it's mid-morning! And there's no clouds above us!" Some cat sounded frightened.

Alpinefog spoke up, his hearty voice deep and reassuring. "It's a Starclan sign. It had to be! No weather like this could produce lighting like that."

"It's a Starclan sign that Jadestar must leave," Tinyflame hissed. "That's why it came while she was speaking."

"No. Look there!" Emberfawn, a reddish-brown tabby tom, had his neck craned to look at something. All of the cats crawled closer to see it.

The spot where the lighting hit had blackened, bare earth all around its vicinity. If Jadestar had been just a few strides closer, she would've been hit by it.

But that wasn't what Crescentsky cared about right now. Inside the ring of burnt, charred grass, she saw a teeny tiny flame burning on a single green blade, placed right in its center.

The medicine cat sign that Starclan promised us...!

"Tinyflame is the new medicine cat!" Oatpaw exclaimed.

Q: *Did you expect it to be Tinyflame?*

A/N: Stay tuned for a Tinyflame Bonus Chapter

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[image] [image]

It was a warm day in Riverclan's territory beside the lake. The sun glinted off smooth-flowing river-water, while stones were heated by its bathing light.

All that day, Riverclan was bustling with activity. Cats pulled out weeds from around camp at Lagoonstripe's instruction, and tidied up the leaf-littered den entrance. Cats went in and out of camp on their assigned patrols, bringing in prey and hauling out debris, trying to clear the clutter that was gathered around the medicine cat's den. Cats hauled moss and collected cobwebs, cleaned out the old herb-shelves, and offered Tinyflame good will in being chosen by Starclan.

My sister is the new medicine cat.

And Starclan had stayed true to their word. The sign had arrived when they'd least expected it.

Crescentsky recalled the heart-pounding moments between that clamorous thunderclap and Emberfawn pointing out the small burning flame. It extinguished itself a few minutes after, all the while keeping contained to one blade of grass underneath the watchful eyes of all the
clan cats.

Warriors were visiting Tinyflame and congratulating her long after sunset. They asked her littermate a lot of questions, like how she was going to be trained, and whether she would revert back to her apprentice name or not, or if she'd start sleeping in the run-down medicine cat's den tonight. Tinyflame looked overwhelmed.

But really, what I'm *concerned about is whether she wants to be one or not.*

Crescentsky was proud to know that her sister had the opportunity

to fill such an important role. But she hadn't gotten the chance alone to ask her, 'Do you really want to be a medicine cat?'

And she found that she couldn't find the answer in her sister's blank expressions. Tinyflame looked disconnected, as if she herself didn't even know how to feel about it yet.

Maybe she's hiding it.

Crescentsky thought she saw her littermate's face twitch in anger once or twice, but then it turned emotionless again.

Jadestar's distruptances had been put on hold, for now. The tortishelle she-cat had withdrawn herself, tidying up some of the den walls around camp but still appearing stiff and resentful in her body language. Trufflefur and Rainstrike were sitting a couple of fox-lengths away from one another, and Crescentsky could tell that it annoyed the Skyclan leader, but that she didn't want to make another show of herself.

Something still has to be done about her and Sootface, if they keep arguing against us.

"Congratulations once again, Tinyflame." Emberfawn said as he approached behind Oatpaw and dipped his head.

Crescentsky was hardly listening to him. She shifted uncomfortably, the pain in her haunch causing a powerful nausea to roll inside her belly.

"I think you'll be amazing at the role."

Racoonstripe came up behind Emberfawn just then, joining him at the shoulder. "Can you treat my ripped dewclaw? It was torn on a riverstone this morning, and it hurts."

Tinyflame gave an awkward shrug, glancing at him.

"Not yet. I can after Starclan teaches me how to heal you in my dreams, though." She looked nervous at that.

"Are you excited?" Crescentsky probed. "Or...?"

"Oh- um, yes. It's just..." she glanced at Raccoonstripe and Emberfawn, as if she didn't want to continue speaking in front of them.

"I'll tell you later."

"Okay. I have something to you later, too." Crescentsky laid down after that, pressing her belly against the cool grass.

It's not hot out tonight, and yet I feel uncomfortably warm. And ugh, my forehead hurts...

Emberfawn settled beside Cheetah, who was eagerly listening to Rainstrike talk about the lightning strike.

Rainstrike left out the part about the arguing, though. Cheetah began pouting after Rainstrike finished explaining the experience.

"Mouse-dung, I missed it! Lagoonstripe and Racoonstripe did, too. We were late coming back from the sunhigh patrol, since Racoonstripe ripped his claw.

But wow, now both of my friends are super important to the clan." Her mouth curled into a grin while her tail flipped. "That's neat, isn't it?"

"What do you mean, super important? Nothing has changed about Crescentsky. *She* hasn't been made a medicine cat." Rowanpaw asked with resentment in her tone. She was observing the exchange with slitted eyes a few paces away from them. The chestnut she-cat was stripping the flesh from a fish spine, picking at it meticulously with her claws.

"Besides, Tinyflame was only made a medicine cat because she's the smallest and weakest cat in the clan. For a Riverclan warrior, she's kind of puny."

Crescentsky snarled a warning. *You can say whatever you like about me, but keep your jaws shut about Tinyflame!*

"Oh, uh-..." Cheetah rushed to explain herself.

"I just that Crescentsky's so like, great ya know? She traveled around the lake to look for the other clans and survived. She saved us once on the Starclan journey, too. When she thought it would be safer to swim the roughest waters of the Windclan border stream, it was the right call. We lost sight of the wolves and found each other later that night."

By this point Rowanpaw was seething. She broke the fish spine in two, then got up and stomped away.

"Whatever," Tinyflame hunched her shoulders and turned away, while Emberfawn stared after Rowanpaw's retreating haunches disparagingly.

Then the young tom said, "She's weird."

Cats kept coming to sit beside and chat with Crescentsky and Tinyflame, so that they still didn't get the chance to speak alone.

Crescentsky tried not to stress out over it. Hopefully their luck would hold out for another day, and she could get another night's sleep without needing to defend the camp.

If she *did* have to, she didn't know what she would do. There were religiously two cats posted outside the camp walls each night, and Lagoonstripe would not assign her until her wounds healed.

Which wasn't looking good...

I'd have to switch in front of the guards, or tell them to run into camp and leave me. That certainly isn't likely to work... Great Starclan, I can't wait for us to confess these secrets.

She could already feel the giant weight partially lifting from her shoulders. Whatever happened, happened. At least they wouldn't have to lie anymore.

Her head still throbbed. *Ugh, my body feels like a piece of carrion on the Thunderpath.*

Sootface broke into her thoughts.

"I knew it would be a she-cat chosen. Most of the time she-cats are chosen by Starclan as medicine cats. It's because they have a softer and gentler nature, whereas toms are more protective of their clan and kin."

Alpinefog rolled his eyes. He had a hind-limb stretched out and was grooming it. The grey tom paused in his licking in order to speak.

"That means nothing. Toms have been medicine cats for seasons. And each cat has their own individual personality."

"You're talking out of your ears. Based off what I've seen, Jadestar is more protective and fierce than you," Crescentsky added her input.

There wasn't much that Sootface could think of to say in defense of himself, so he just muttered "I was just saying that *most* of them are."

I need to lie down again. My leg hurts badly tonight. Crescentsky got up, keeping the injured hind-limb tucked underneath her belly.

She tried to keep it that way as she padded past her clanmates, but it was difficult. The stench of infection was wafting up and around her flanks.

A hot, searing pain radiated from the core of her infected injury and all the way up through her pelvis. Crescentsky spasmed at the agony, nearly dropping right in front of the other cats and curling in on herself.

The nausea came after she had settled in the den. She didn't get sick, which was good since she couldn't bear to stand up again anyway, but her stomach kept hurting.

I hope it's not too late for my hind-leg, like it was too late for Houndspots's wound. Crescentsky had been walking with a permanent limp for days now. She wondered if it would ever heal, if it was possible for her sister to learn the ways of a medicine cat quickly enough.

Well, I'm not going to pressure her or ask for treatment like all of the other cats were. How could she, when it was clear that Tinyflame

had none of the answers herself?

Crescentsky wanted so badly to console her littermate, to speak to her about her decision to spill all of their secrets to the clan *now*, and to ask her if this was the path that she wanted.

But it might jeopardize Tinyflame's chance at becoming a medicine cat. *So I have to know if she really wants it. If she wants me to tell the whole clan.*

But ugh, I can't ask her right now!

The moon had already chased away the sun, and Tinyflame was still stuck outside talking to the other cats.

Tomorrow, then. Crescentsky thought, thrusting her muzzle underneath a forepaw and trying to fall asleep quickly.

I'll talk to her tomorrow. I'll figure out how she feels about all this, and what our next course of action is.

That night Crescentsky's wound festered with a vengeance. No matter how was she laid, she couldn't get comfortable.

And even after she did fall asleep, it woke her up several times after that. Yet never at a time that Tinyflame appeared to be awake.

Crescentsky bit back the whimpers of agony that threatened to slip from her muzzle. She didn't want to wake the entire warriors den, let alone her sister.

Tinyflame might be sharing with Starclan in her dreams right now. Even if I was lying here dying, it would be wrong to wake her.

And so she regretfully settled back into her nest each time, choosing to suffer rather than wake her sleeping littermate.

"Crescentsky, is that you again?" Sootface lifted his huge blocky head.

"Can't a cat get some Starclan-forsaken sleep around here? Stop moving around, or get out of the den!"

(BTW 5 chapters until The End)

Tinyflame's Worth-Bonus Chapter

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This wasn't supposed to happen. Starclan chose wrong. What kind of fish-headed furball gallivanting around up there had the idea to choose me?

Tinyflame huffed as she slid, exhausted, into her nest. She took a deep breath to ease both her thoughts and the pain in her chest.

It wouldn't fully go away. Just like the anxiety of her claws being found out by the clan.

What will they tell me? That I was chosen because I was the most convenient choice? The easiest choice?

There couldn't possibly be any other reason.

Because I'm small, like Rowanpaw said. Because I have no claws so I'm useless as a warrior anyway! At that thought her heart dropped, and Tinyflame frowned as she stared into the dark moss lining her nest.

What will they expect from me? That I'll be happy about this? That I'll be thankful*? Well, I'm not.*

And above all, what would she say to them? Would she accept the role?

Tinyflame tossed and turned in her nest. The mossy bracken bed beside hers was still but not quiet, as Crescentsky softly snoozed on.

She forced herself to lie still, keeping her eyes closed and her tail

curled close to her forepaws. This time the she-cat finally sank into some well-deserved rest of her own; just as Crescentsky was harrowedly rousing from her fever and raging infection.

There was no sense of time or space as the black she-cat fell asleep in one world and fell toward another. Her eyes simply closed and then reopened.

As a starry violet sky shimmered into view high above her eartips, she did not question where she was. Tinyflame already knew.

An indigo field stretched flat and uniform. The grassland surrounding her nearly surpassed her muzzle.

Tinyflame whirled around, noticing a natural-forming clay enclave among the dried wheat-grasses and sedge-bushes stretching far as the eye could see.

It almost looked like a leader's den, only it was large enough to accommodate multiple cats. There were seemingly intertwined entrance tunnels placed all over the vessel. The well-designed entry holes were compact, just wide enough for a cat to slip through.

A river with overgrown forestry swamping its banks cut through the land close by, winding so far that Tinyflame couldn't see the end of it. Willow and beech trees dotted its margins.

Kinda looks like Riverclan terrain. But I've never seen it before.

"Well then, where are you? Care to get this over with and explain yourselves?" She challenged aloud, although her voice tremored a bit.

In the following moments the small she-cat began to grow uncertain. Would Starclan shun her for her blatant prompting?

Tinyflame flicked her head around as grass stalks in the distance twitched and then moved. A glowing white she-cat was making her way through the lush greenery tightly packed beside the stream. She broke through and drew to a halt as she reached Tinyflame.

"Nice to meet you, too."

"You're the Starclan cat that Crescentsky spoke to last time, aren't you? She said Cloverkit- I mean Cloverpaw and a white she-cat called Whiteleaf were the ones that spoke to her in her dream. Plus our father, Everfrost."

"Yes, I am Whiteleaf."

Tinyflame lifted her chin.

"So you're gonna train me how to be a medicine cat. Hmph. Was it your idea?" She flattened her ears, tone accusatory.

"My idea for what?"

"To make me Riverclan's medicine cat."

"The decision was not determined by me alone."

"Whoever's decision it was, it was fish-brained! They should've picked someone else."

"Why?" Whiteleaf blinked calmly and settled down upon a cool, bare patch of earth, almost as if to say 'I've got all night for this.'

"Because I'm not-... Medicine cat material. I'm not, uh. You only picked me for my lack of claws."

"And what determines that?" Whiteleaf asked casually.

Tinyflame turned her face away, confused and becoming more upset.

So it's going to be like that, huh?

"You *know*! Cats having a connection to Starclan, showing interest in it since they were a kit-"

Whiteleaf interrupted. "But no cat in your clan has shown interest since they were a kit. No cat had any prior connection to Starclan. Nor any cat in Skyclan, or the returned Shadowclan loners."

"You only picked me because I have no claws!" She repeated. "You

gave me and Crescentsky these positions because we're useless as clan cats if we don't have some other assets to make up for our missing claws."

Whiteleaf laughed from the pits of her belly, loud and strong. Her chuckle carried across the river, but no one else was there.

Tinyflame stared at her incredulously, her purple eyes glimmering.

"You've got it the other way around," Whiteleaf said eventually.

"We gave you these positions because you don't have your claws, sure- that *might* be apart of it." She elaborated.

"But it wasn't because you're useless without them."

I'm surprised she didn't lie to me. Defensiveness still echoed in Tinyflame's heart, however.

"Then why?"

"Let's get to the point. Tell me, Tinyflame. Are you trying to convey that you don't want to be a medicine cat?"

"I don't know, I just.... Well, I never did before!" Tinyflame blew out an exasperated breath. "I thought being a warrior was my destiny. I thought I was good at it before I lost my claws."

"Destinies can change." Whiteleaf shrugged, closing her eyes in relaxation as if she were calmly waiting for something. "If the beholder should want theirs to."

"But you guys waited until the last second. A-and there was no warning. And there's no *reason* to it. To it being *me*." She was beginning to grow frustrated. At herself or Starclan, she didn't know anymore.

"I didn't get the chance to think about it, like, *at all!* Now it's all on me! Not that I don't want to help my clan, I just never expected this. And I don't...- I'm not the kind of cat who..." Tinyflame sat down, fighting to keep her fur flat. Fighting to keep her breathing calm, like she always did when she was scared; whether there was

holes next to her heart or not.

"Not the kind of cat who what?"

Who's gifted and talented and social enough to be a medicine cat. I don't have the patience. I don't fit that standard. How could I?

She didn't answer.

"Answer something else, then." Whiteleaf flicked an ear, careful to keep her gaze cool and nonjudgmental, as if she knew that it would only agitate Tinyflame more.

"Why didn't you run off when the wolves attacked camp the other night?"

"You're deathly afraid of the wolves. You've never faced one head-on before."

For a few heartbeats, Tinyflame didn't respond. A soft wind lifted the dark fur on her pelt, and she lifted her muzzle.

"How is this relative to anything?"

At that, Whiteleaf's tone became clipped and flat.
"Just answer." She leaned forward, green gaze sparkling and intense.

"Because I didn't want my sister to die at my expense, whether she had the advantage or not. Because I didn't want to be the cat that ran away again. Because I didn't want to be the one who-... does nothing... For the clan." Tinyflame grimaced. She wouldn't meet Whiteleaf's gaze.

"My sister has saved me more times than I can count. I only got my warrior name because of her. And I've never once saved her or anyone else," she whispered.

"And look how that night turned out. She ended up having to save my pelt anyway!" Tinyflame growled, ashamed.

"I was so fish-brained. I should've left like she told me." Her voice

rolled to a stop bitterly.

"Go on," Whiteleaf urged, now lying with her muzzle on her forelegs as she gazed at Tinyflame expectantly.

"I have nothing to be proud of. I didn't even complete my warrior's assessment alone. And it's because I'm not like Crescentsky. I didn't want to return and tell the clan that she was out there fighting, or dying. Because I'm a coward, I guess." The black warrior's voice shook.

"I can't be brave and fearless, especially without my claws. I always think about what a failure I am now. And I don't like that about myself. I don't like who I am anymore. I can't find any worth in myself...."

"It sounds like you need something that gives you purpose. Something that you can own in the way of usefulness to your clan. You can grow and change, you know. Become more integral to your clan, and learn patience as well as remedies.

I can offer you that, Tinyflame. That's why we chose you. Regardless what you think of yourself, Starclan can see the resilience in you. We see the talent and potential you have to offer. We see what you want, and we can give it." She sounded sincere, her voice ringing out across the starlit Starclan meadow.

Tinyflame's ears pricked as she realized. *Whiteleaf sort of understands. At least in one small way, she gets it.*

"Nice speech." She snorted above the softly chattering river several fox-lengths away from them. "You mean a lifetime of chewing up bitter herbs?" Tinyflame's tone was laced with sarcasm.

But she wasn't stupid. Before the words even left her mouth, the idea had begun to ravel itself inside her mind.

Her saving her clanmates. *Her* being cherished and useful. Being important to Riverclan. Something that she had thought was robbed of her previously.

She needed that. And even more so? She *wanted* it.

"Dusty herbs, bringing new life into the clan, becoming a beacon of hope for your injured clanmates... all in a day's work." For the first time, Whiteleaf grinned.

"So, Tinyflame. Would you like train with me in your dreams each night, until you learn the ways of a Riverclan medicine cat?" As Whiteleaf asked, Tinyflame felt her heart pound with the realization of what she was about to agree to.

"I'll try my best," she said.

But Whiteleaf shook her head, chuckling.

"Oh don't worry, dear. With me as your mentor, you'll become one of the most legendary medicine cats."

Tinyflame nodded. Her gaze was firm and determined, but behind her her tail was twitching.

"What will I learn first?"

Whiteleaf's face turned serious. "First I'm going to teach you how to save your littermate's life. There's a fair chance she could die from her infection already."

Tinyflame wasn't given much time to feel the shock of her words.

"Then you'll be shown how to treat your own wounds with basic herb knowledge. And you'll learn about advanced herb gathering. We'll move onto poltices after that; or at least the ones you don't already know from treating Crescentsky's wound."

Tinyflame was even more happy that she'd agreed now.

I didn't know that Crescentsky was in such a bad way. But she knew why Whiteleaf hadn't told her that first.

And her sister hadn't been complaining about pain in the den much. Apart from groaning and the occasional sharp hiss, she hid it.

So how long has she been hiding the severity of that wound?

"From what I can tell, Crescentsky has a stubborn infection in her leg-wound. It's begun circulating in her blood. But if we can keep her strong and healthy, then an attempt at late treatment might work. See, Tinyflame?" Whiteleaf suprised her again by asking.

"See what?" She looked around, but Whiteleaf was only looking at her.

"See how you're going to save your littermate's life after she just saved yours."

Tinyflame smiled as her heart warmed with pride.

"I will. I have to. We need her,"

"Riverclan needs you too. They always have. Now they just need you more than ever." Whiteleaf's said, and that got a nod out of Tinyflame.

"I'll do everything I can. Just show me how."

"Okay," said the white Starclan cat.

"Follow me to these caves."

Tinyflame did as she was told, accompanying the she-cat on the short walk over there. Before they stopped beside an enclave opening, Whileleaf directed her again.

"We haven't much time together each night, so you'll need to learn as fast as you can. First I'm going to start with the poultice you'll have to mix for her injury. If some of the required herbs are missing or expired in your medicine den, which they probably are; then Riverclan will have to go out and find new ones. I'll show you where to look."

Tinyflame nodded. She could tell that this would be a lot to remember, and tried not to feel overwhelmed.

Whiteleaf all of a sudden turned her head and yowled down into

the cave entrance, jaws stretched wide and whiskers flexing.

"Chaosclaw! It's time!"

The fallen Riverclan warrior stalked out from the darkness of the cave; or rather, chased it away. His illuminated body shone with starlight, and white speckles sparkled underneath his paws as he stepped, brushing between the two-sided dirt walls.

"Alright, I'm here." He responded gruffly.

"Nice to see you again, Tinyflame." Chaosclaw nodded at her brusquely, but there was a kind glimmer in his eyes.

"Apparently I have to be your 'healing decoy', tonight and all, so we've got a little time to catch up before you go back to Riverclan."

Tinyflame was still awed by his beautiful starlit pelt, which seemed to shine twice as bright as Whiteleaf's.

"Follow us into this cave. It's been prepared for your teachings," Whiteleaf interjected briskly, urging them on.

"You can reconcile in there."

Tinyflame shyly ducked past the entrance, minding her ears. She pulled her shoulders closer together to fit through a winding tunnel, led by Chaosclaw's tail-tip.

The cave they stepped into was well-lit by a natural-formed cave hole filled with stars and casting pooled moonlight. A starlit cyan pool sat in its center, cradled in a rocky scooped-out dip and taking up most of the space inside.

Tinyflame could see almost every nook and cranny, even at night; which all had several interlocking jutted outcrops for a cat to leap to and fro.

All of what she saw was reflected by a glowing blue light strewn across the walls and ground. The urethral light was beaming down onto the pool's surface, where it mirrored and scattered. There were wide winding footpaths all along the pool's edges, and fat swatches

of fast-growing moss lining the still water.

In a way the cave reminded her of the Moonpool's enclave, only much grander in appearance and size. Plus it was enclosed. It looked as if she could dip her paws into the pool's liquid starlight, then reach up and grab the near half-moon that was lingering above.

"I didn't expect *this* to be inside of that giant dirt mound!"

"Things can be more profound than they initially seem. Especially on the inside," Whiteleaf replied.

Chaosclaw sat down on a rock close to the water and wrapped his tail around his paws.

"Go on now, share with me the clan's business since I've gone. Watching from up here ain't the same as living and breathing it down there. Tell me, is Alpinefog still scared of frogs?"

"Only when they're alive and hopping still," she purred. "Raccoonstripe pranked him by putting one in his nest last quarter-moon. He woke up and jumped out of his nest like *he* was a frog!"

Chaosclaw gave a hearty laugh, then gazed past her shoulder as if he was imagining the dismayed look on Alpinefog's face.

"It's nice that the clan can still have joy during times like these. Make sure to keep that alive, Tinyflame. No matter where life takes you."

Tinyflame took that advice and held it close to her heart, fighting to keep a stupid smile from beaming across her stupid face.

I resented the idea of this the second I saw that little flame.

Starclan trusts me... of all cats, to become Riverclan's new healer .

I have the chance to save my sister and to benefit the entire clan.

I mustn't waste it.

Those little words stayed there- just barely lodged in the back of her brain. Like a flea that she was aware of but couldn't- didn't *want* to chase off.

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Q: If you had ever wondered, *what does Crescentsky's warrior name mean?*
A: She reaches for the sky/moon. This cat will try to achieve the unachievable.

———————

"I've been dying to tell you something."

"I need to tell you about my dream, as well."

Crescentsky hobbled out of camp on fatigued legs the next morning. She followed behind Tinyflame as they walked a short distance out into the willow-tree forest.

The clan had taken up most of their sunrise, insisting that Tinyflame share what she'd seen in her dreams. Crescentsky and her sister had explained that they needed some fresh air and alone time, away from the prying questions and watchful eyes of the clan. Lagoonstripe had understood and permitted them to a short forest walk, despite Crescentsky's injuries.

"Alright. But we've got to keep an eye out for fresh goldenrod and comfrey. Whiteleaf said I'll be needing it for a poultice. She showed me what it looked like inside of a shining pool. She said that there's a fair chance I can expel this infection and save your leg. She's the one training me, by the way. Whiteleaf was a medicine cat before she died." Tinyflame took a breath so that she could continue.

"Wait! Before you say more I wanted to ask you... Were you okay yesterday?"

"Well, I wasn't at first but now I am. Initially I didn't like the idea of becoming a medicine cat."

"Oh. You're scared that the clan wouldn't think of you as a good

choice, or what? I'm sorry for what Rowanpaw said. She was just being fish-brained. You know her muzzle likes to run faster than her paws."

"No. I was scared that I wouldn't be good enough. That I'd fail at it like I have with everything else. Plus... other stuff."

"Aw. Tinyflame, you haven't-. Nothing is your fault."

"It's alright. Whiteleaf and I talked, and I'm open to trying it out. Maybe I'll turn out being great at it, who knows." Tinyflame showed a small grin, causing Crescentsky to perk her ears at the unprecedented confidence.

"That's great!" She purred and nearly head-butted her sister in the shoulder, but the spasm of pain in her hind-leg caused her not to. Crescentsky sat down with an ache radiating throughout her damaged limb. She twitched uncomfortably.

They conversed awhile longer. The sun began creeping up the sky and its rays burning off the last of the morning dew.

"We need to find Cheetah and tell her this too, but listen. I've decided it's time to tell the clan. We've waited long enough."

Tinyflame knew what that meant, and she appeared not to like it. Her face turned obscure as she flattened her ears and glanced away. Scanning the silver birch trees around them to make sure they weren't overheard, Tinyflame opened her jaws again.

"Are you sure? I think it would be wiser to run a few more tests. We could wait until you're healed first and then find the rest of the answers to any questions that the clan might ask."

Crescentsky shook her head.

"We don't have *time* to wait. We can't just keep lying. If we must, then I should run the tests now and tell the clan today."

"But you're injured." Tinyflame began kneading the grass in a troublesome way. "And Starclan's instructed me to heal you. How can you even walk that far?"

"I don't want to wait anymore," Crescentsky stated stubbornly. "I've been doing alright getting around with a limp. I'll just *limp* there and *limp* back." She almost winced at her own words, especially when Tinyflame gave her a sour look.

"Seriously? You shouldn't always-"

"What if the wolves come back? We're going to get caught up in our lies soon, I can feel it."

Tinyflame studied her, thinking. Sunlight lavished her sleek black pelt, causing it to shine in gold-white rivulets along her back and shoulders. Some purple stems of lavender grew across their path, and Crescentsky wound her flanks along it, appreciating the smell as she rubbed it into her fur.

"Okay, fine. Here's what we'll do. You'll have to fetch Cheetah while I find the herbs. You two will head off into Shadowclan territory and find the rest of the answers we need. We only need to know a couple more things, right?" Tinyflame asked.

"One, do you have any instinct whatsoever to hurt cats in your wolf form. And two; are your thoughts and intentions altered around prey when you're in its body for a long time? Or when you're hungry," the lithe she-cat concluded.

Crescentsky nodded. "I can test all of that out at the same time. They're almost the same questions. Plus, I haven't eaten yet."

"You know Cheetah will smell like prey whenever you're in the body of that *thing*. So be careful."

"I will, but I should hurry. Did you see Cheetah in camp?" Crescentsky was eager despite the pain she knew it would bring her.

No more secrets. No more lies. Just me, my clan and the truth. No matter what it costs me. Her paws nearly shook, but it wasn't from nerves. Part of Crescentsky was relieved.

But the other part wasn't. She'd been feeling uncharacteristically weak lately. *This isn't going to be easy.*

"I think Cheetah was assigned to Emberfawn's border patrol with Trufflefur and Nighthowl. Either go and find her or wait until she returns. If you're certain you'll be okay," Tinyflame pressed, her eyes glistening with worry.

"Aren't *you* the medicine cat?" Crescentsky waved her tail goodbye as she teased her sister.

"In that case-"

"I'll be *fine,"* she said, exasperated.

"I have to do this. It can't wait. The wolves will return soon and we'll end up getting caught."

Crescentsky was weaving some extra thorny vines into the apprentice's den walls when Cheetah arrived back with the patrol. They slipped out of camp discreetly soon after.

She ignored the tremor in her legs as they plodded on determinedly. The Riverclan warrior checked the wind as they left Riverclan's scent-markers behind.

The coniferous Shadowclan woods were dark and brooding. Low-hanging branches and brambles provided low visibility, and the only stream they'd come across had been barely paw-deep. Boggy water squelched up between Crescentsky's toes.

"It's been so long since we hung out just the two of us, Crescentsky. Finally I get to hang out with my best she-cat friend! Who, by the way (this is just a perk-) can into a wolf and *kill all of our enemies!* How incredible is that?" Cheetah chirped as she bounded along.

Crescentsky swallowed and looked around, despite the fact that they were already well out of Riverclan territory and plodding through an abandoned clan's land.

"Shh. Keep your voice down for now. You know, it's possible that

Darkflower could've come back looking for her son."

"Who?"

Crescentsky lifted her head and parted her jaws, checking the air incessantly again. They weren't very far from Shadowclan's camp, although that wasn't their destination.

They were getting as far away from Riverclan land as they could before Crescentsky turned, and only so much so that they could arrive back before sundown. Her hoisted leg had cost them time.

"Nobody. I think that if she were here, we'd have scented her by now. If she were alive, anyways. Let's go."

Crescentsky mentally prepared to switch into her wolf after they had traveled several fox-lengths farther. She rounded the overgrown and almost unrecognizable Shadowclan camp, and then headed off toward the topmost edge of their swampy territory.

With each footfall she felt like she would fall over. Her very bones felt starved for strength. Crescentsky's stomach rolled while she tossed a few words over her shoulder.

"I'm not going to talk much in this form. So don't expect me to." She felt bad being so reserved towards her friend, but her infection was causing her to be irritable.

"Okay. I know that you don't like to," Cheetah sympathized with a nod.

Rrr-ouch! It's so inflamed. Crescentsky winced with every pawstep.

"This is far enough. I'll do it here."

Cheetah took a step back with her ears pricked. The tabby-and-white warrior shook out her pelt with her eyes braced against the fur that would inevitably fly into her eyes.

This time Crescentsky felt she knew what to expect. She'd almost grown accustomed to the switch, odd as it still was.

But when she opened her eyes nothing had changed. The forest still stretched only a few inches below her. Each verdant blade of grass was just as tall and visible as the last, rather than small and minuscule beneath her towering chest and lean forelegs.

"Uh, it didn't work," Cheetah advised loudly.

"I know. But why?"

Crescentsky tried it again, then again and again. Nothing happened, save for her looking like a fool as she stood there shaking out her bone-dry pelt.

Panic lit up her senses, chasing away any lingering thoughts she'd had about her inflamed hindleg.

She fought to ward the feeling off, stepping back and spinning around, trying to find an answer in the bark of the pines or the twitching sweetgrass stems that were sprouting all around them.

There was no answer. Nothing moved out of the ordinary, no new sounds or scents came on the wind.

"Maybe we have to find the answer from within," Cheetah said. She lifted her voice over a bluejay's twittering birdsong.

"Starclan gives hints and signs, sure; but it's not often straightforward, right? Maybe they warned us about this already, in some mysterious Starclan way."

Crescentsky stared at her and shook her head.

"How did you sound like a medicine cat just now? Are you being possessed by some Starclan cat?"

Cheetah shrugged and giggled.

"How is it you know more about the clans already than some clan cats themselves do?" She muttered. Bewildered but calmed down rather effectively, Crescentsky sat down to think.

It came to her eventually, after she recited every single word that

Starclan had said to her.

"That's it! Cheetah, you're right."

The leap back to her feet sent a jagged crack of pain throughout her injury. Grinding her teeth, Crescentsky fought to get the words out.

"-Starclan said during our trip to the Moonpool that the gift was temporary. I thought that meant that they'd take it away soon. Which, obviously they still could but- I think *this* is why they mentioned it."

She shook out her pelt one more time, and finding it to no avail swiftly carried on.

"The power doesn't work after sunrise. That's why they called it 'temporary.'"

Cheetah's golden eyes widened and she purred.

"Oh, that makes sense! But specifically what hours of daylight? Can you use it at dawn and dusk? At what time does it stop being available?"

"I don't know." Crescentsky's pain prevented her from speaking further.

"Okay. But I do have to say, you look rough, Crescentsky. You should rest when we get back."

The tabby-and-white she-cat nodded. Lemon-yellow greenleaf sunlight glinted off of parched grass shoots around their feet. A ladybug crept onto Crescentsky's paw, and she carefully placed it in a small pool of shade close by.

This 'temporary' thing could end up being a problem. The wolves have already come during daylight before, and there's nothing stopping them from doing it again.

Why, Starclan? What's the point in shutting off the power after sunrise?

"I guess we can't find any answers right now. We could ask

Tinyflame to ask Whiteleaf, but that's about all. We still have time to make it back to camp. Let's go quickly, so they never suspect we snuck off."

Crescentsky knew that their return would take just as long at their trip here, however- if not longer.

I'm so slow today. I should've let Tinyflame treat my wound first. Too bad that fish has already swam downstream, she thought.

"Okay, I'm ready."

Cheetah stood up to leave, her spotted pelt looking shiny and well-groomed in the dappled sunlight. They joined at the shoulder and began walking back through the spacious Shadowclan pines.

Undergrowth brushed against Crescentsky's flanks, causing her to flinch when anything touched her tender haunch-wound.

"Are we still exposing all our secrets to the clan today?" Cheetah asked after they gossiped about the Shadowclan arrivals for a while. Crescentsky didn't hesitate as she answered her intuitive friend.

"Yes. We're not waiting any longer. I'll tell them what I know, and explain what I don't and why.

"In some ways you'll be at their mercy," Cheetah made an insightful comment again.

"But in a lot more ways they'll be at yours."

Please give Warrior name ideas for **Rowanpaw !**

Some Personality Traits: Cynical//Impulsive//Self-absorbed//
Arrogant//Disgruntled//Easily Offended

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[image]

The sky broke open that day began pouring rain unexpectedly. However, it quickly tapered off.

And then returned again. It was that uncertain type of rain, the kind that couldn't decide whether it wanted to stay or go. So by the time Crescentsky and Cheetah arrived back, they were annoyed that it had begun to rain again for the third time.

All the way there, Crescentsky's wound was practically yowling at her to stop and rest. She felt dizzy and uncoordinated. *And* they hadn't caught anything on the way back; not just because the riverbanks were rapidly swelling, but because they didn't want to draw attention to themselves at being gone for so long.

Tinyflame's original plan had been to fly by the seat of their tails and come up with some lame excuse along the lines of checking for wolf scent beyond clan borders. But Crescentsky refused to lie a tenth time if she had the choice. If any cat asked her what she'd been doing, she planned to announce "I'll tell you everything at sundown."

She didn't know how much longer she could go on, physically, anyways. She could feel it in her body *and* mind that she needed den rest and medicine care. The kind that kept her confined to the medicine cat's den.

After tonight, I'm going to rest. I should've spent today doing just that. But... we needed to tell the clan.

Her paws were so weary, it felt like they would drop off. It wasn't the *tired* and *overworked* kind of weary, it was the sluggish '*my body might be fighting to keep me alive*' kind of weary. And Crescentsky could feel it.

The rain wasn't even doing anything to soothe her upturned wound,

exposed and red. It only stung as water trickled over its cracked and oozing edges.

Should've listened to Tinyflame. She padded faster.

In a way the spontaneous downpours had brought them luck. Any cats who weren't on patrol or in the dens sat in sheltered areas around camp. The foliage was weighted down with rain.

Crescentsky desperately craved relief from her swollen haunch-wound in the form of sleep. She was in the middle of heading for the medicine cat's den when she heard pawsteps behind her.

The dark tabby and-white warrior turned her head. Tinyflame was walking up with a messy leaf-wrap in her jaws. Herbs were spilling from one side of it.

"Hey, Crescentsky. Cheetah. *Don't* tell me anything about it here. It can wait until later."

"Hi." Crescentsky knew what she meant. Tinyflame would be disappointed to hear that they had more questions than answers now.

"Did anyone say anything about how long we were gone?" Cheetah whispered.

"Trufflefur asked how you were doing earlier, but other than that no." Tinyflame's dark pelt was speckled with herb-litter.

"Come to the medicine cat's den so I can apply your poultice. I hope I remembered all of the herbs and how to extract them correctly..."

The smaller she-cat looked ruffled and overworked, but despite this Crescentsky could detect some trace of relief in her violet eyes. She blinked.

"I will. My hip's been hurting worse than usual. And I feel hot even when I'm out in the forest." She slid her pelt along her littermate's.

"Which means you have a fever... Whiteleaf said I could treat that with feverfew, though; and I already have some fresh stalks. I sent

Oatpaw and Emberfawn after some earlier."

I'm so proud of you. Crescentsky tried to muster a strained purr, but it tapered off.

"Are you okay?" Tinyflame asked. She stepped forward to support Crescentsky with her shoulder, but Crescentsky sat down heavily instead.

"No matter what happens I won't let the clan prevent you from being a medicine cat. They can do whatever they like to me, but I won't let them demote you for something you couldn't control." Crescentsky stared over her sister's shoulders and out into the sheet of rain, keeping watch while she spoke.

"Tinyflame is going to be the best medicine cat that the clans have ever seen. She's being trained by Riverclan's ancestors!" Cheetah meowed out loud, but still there was no one in sight but them.

Crescentsky watched as Cheetah stepped closer and rubbed her jaw along Tinyflame's pelt and then hers.

"Well, okay, but-" Tinyflame began, sounding like she wasn't much concerned about that right now.

"Crescentsky isn't looking too good. I'm worried about her. Starclan said that she-... well, I just want to get her to the medicine cat's den."

"It's *your* den now, remember?" Cheetah replied.

I love them so much. This can't be the end of clan life for us. If it's just me that has to get banished, I guess I could live with that.

But then I wouldn't be able to protect Riverclan...

I don't want to lose them or my clan...! Crescentsky's heart dropped, and she felt a unnerving thought worm its way to the front just then.

Would she really let the clan drive her out, if that's what they truly wanted?

I guess I would. It would be kit-like and dishonorable to go against the desires of her clanmates, to stay and serve them when it was against their wishes. Her mood dampened even further.

"You really need to come to the medicine cat's den and rest, Crescentsky." Tinyflame repeated for the third time.

"But before we get out of this rain, when are we telling them?" She asked, stepping back from their short embrace.

Cheetah looked around. "Not every cat is in camp right now. Half the warriors are out on patrol."

"I'd hate to be them," Tinyflame glanced up while Crescentsky flicked raindrops from her ears.

"I'm due for a pre-sunfall patrol later on today," said Cheetah. "Hopefully the rain has tapered off by then."

"So? When? Crescentsky, you *need* to lie down in your nest. How many times do I have to say it?" Her littermate insisted. Tinyflame's dripping black fur was drooped down around her face.

"We'll tell them this evening, after Cheetah and her patrol get back and every cat is sharing tongues." Crescentsky stated.

"What about the guards?"

"We'll bring them in so they can hear it. We can just say we have something important to tell the clan." *They'll have to listen.*

The two she-cats standing beside her nodded. Tinyflame's tail was low and stiff, while Cheetah glanced at them as if she were worried for the two.

"They *can't* throw you out," she began as the three she-cats started walking toward the dens.

"They just can't. You guys have done so much for the clans already! You're too valuable to lose no matter what you have or don't have."

Cheetah was still crowing on as they left the pebbly river-shore

behind them, rounding the walls of the rocky leader's den.

"Hush!" Tinyflame scolded her.

"Your claws being gone doesn't mean a thing," the spotted she-cat contained her voice to a loud whisper.

"It just means you can't hunt as well. So what? Is all I'm saying. And about the other thing-"

"Shh!" Crescentsky warned, gently placing her tail in front of Cheetah's muzzle. They were almost through the pelt of fog and rain, and within a few fox-lengths they'd be right in front of the medicine cat's den.

"Keep quiet about it now. We're in the heart of the camp." Tinyflame flicked her ears low, whisper-hiss drawn out as she peered around anxiously.

"What was that you just said about not being able to hunt, and somecat's claws being gone?" A derogatory voice spoke up from somewhere beyond the sheen of rain.

_____

A/N: Questionnaire

Q: Who is the cat speaking?

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artwork by SpiritsX unless otherwise stated

WARNING DO NOT STEAL ANY ART OR CHARACTERS OR DESIGNS!!you may not post or use anywhere without my permission

(There is a spoiler warning for art with spoilers)

Crescentsky's Updated Design

Cheetah

Rowanpaw

Crescentpaw & **Tinypaw** (redesign)

Cheetah *(on the right)* **& Caracal** *(left)* (unfinished)

Crescentkit Tinykit Rowankit *in the nursery*

Character Spotlight#1

Cloverkit

Crescentpaw Early Draft Design (sketch)
!*SHE NO LONGER HAS THIS DESIGN* **!**

Oatkit (sketch)

Crescentpaw

(Old design)

(Art below not by me)

(Final design) by SpiritsX

(Final design) by SpiritsX

Ref Sheet (art not by me)

(art not by me)

Racoonstripe ▽

Reader Q: Which cat should I draw next?

!□!□!□Spoiler Art Below (do not view unless you have read to the end of chapter 52)!□!□!□

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Look away •• If u haven't read till Part 2!

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⚠□ ***!!!Last SpoilerWarning!!!***⚠□

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Crescentsky's wolf (just a fun design concept I like to think that it would look less foxlike in-universe)

Both the wolf&cat are her OLD designs!

72

[image][image]

"What a mouse-brained mistake for your kittypet friend to make. She talks too much for her own good."

Rowanpaw side-stepped out of the slanted falling rainwater, her footfalls sending up splashes in the swelling puddles underpaw. Her tail lashed as she stood tall in front of the medicine cat's den.

"I was right. Hah, I was right!" She laughed with glee, throwing her head back so that her pointy white teeth flashed.

"I knew you were hiding something. Other cats act like I'm stupid, but I *knew* you two were lying!

Enjoy the few minutes you have left to soak up the sunbeams, Crescentsky. You won't be the clan's perfect little warrior anymore, now will you?"

Her yellow eyes were splenetic. *Great Starclan. Not her of all cats. Rowanpaw will do her best to cause a scene.* Dread flushed her pelt.

"You two look pathetic right now. Good luck lying your way out of this one like you did when you 'protected the camp walls.'" She was still aiming her words at Crescentsky and Tinyflame.

"And some cats act like you're the saviors of the clans, *pffaw!*"

The clay enclave that was the medicine den stood shiny and wet behind the chestnut she-cat. Crescentsky had nearly forgotten it was raining. She stood there in shock, not knowing what to do. Not knowing the best way to silence her.

"How should we stop her...?" She mumbled at Tinyflame, but Rowanpaw was so close that she could easily overhear.

"It's either that, or we let her tell on us."

"Let me?" The chestnut she-cat curled her lip.

"You can't 'let me' do anything. I'll do what I want. And by the way, Crescentsky looks like a drowned rat that's died and come back to life again."

There was a complacent smirk growing more and more obvious on Rowanpaw's face, and within a few heartbeats she had said her final word.

"Bye."

The russet-brown she-cat dashed off, leaving the others standing there in shock.

"Get her! Stop her!" Tinyflame snapped, then lowered her volume.

"She's going to tell some cat!" Crescentsky hissed.

"She'll tell Jadestar and Sootface first. Or worse, Quietdew!" Cheetah exclaimed, haring off with her paws kicking up dirt.

Tinyflame and Crescentsky didn't stand there any longer. They took off after Rowanpaw's rapidly-fading scent-trail.

Crescentsky was surprised when it led straight past the warriors den and into the forest. She pulled up beside the others, gasped "She's telling a cat that's out in the forest!" then raced on.

"Maybe a patrol," Cheetah yowled, but the Riverclan tabby didn't waste any breath in replying. She had to reach Rowanpaw in time.

Her chest was already heaving. Her paws were struggling for the muster to keep running.

I never got those herbs. Thanks a lot, Rowanpaw! She growled out loud, lifting her head to scan the rises and dips of the land surrounding. Cheetah and Tinyflame's blurred forms slipped in and out of the trees beside her. They were keeping pace easily.

They soon lost Rowanpaw's scent-trail. The air was humid while the earth was moist and peaty. Out in the willow tree woodland,

between the rivers on their territory- plants smelled sharper and richer than in camp; where the verdure from the onset of leaf-fall lay sprawling and yellow-browned.

Crescentsky cursed as her shoulders worked to slow and turn her pawsteps.

"The scent's no good," she snapped, anxiety plaguing her tone.

"Split up! Keep running until you find her!" She ordered.

What does Rowanpaw even expect to gain? Attention like some little newborn kit would want? Satisfaction at seeing us thrown out?

Just for the sake of drama, probably. I still don't know why she hates us. Crescentsky's tail managed to lash while she feverishly searched, suppressing the urge to give up. Her one good hindleg was wobbling.

I can only assume jealousy. And that's so *petty.*

She had no more time to wonder as she stumbled upon the she-cat, overtaking her as she attempted a quick stop. Both of them slid past one another, paws slipping on the wet leaves.

Rowanpaw found her footing first, trying to escape up the side of a gully to no avail. Wind rushed into Crescentsky's ears as she lept on top of her littermate.

The chestnut apprentice broke free but was tripped by Crescentsky's outstretched paws. The tabby-and-white warrior shoved her back down by the shoulders.

Rowanpaw yowled and scratched at her belly. The sting of her raking claws was nothing compared to the anguish surging through Crescentsky's infectious wound. She slammed her entire body against Rowanpaw's, skull ringing as she thrusted them both against the gully wall.

"Just let me up, you stinking furball!" Rowanpaw caught one of Crescentsky's ear-tips, ripping it.

"Use your claws, Crescentkit! Why won't you use your claws?" Rowanpaw taunted as she gained the upper paw and surged forward. Crescentsky fought to pin her again.

"Just stop!" She tried to rake her back claws against Rowanpaw's flanks in warning, but the angle was too awkward. Rowanpaw kicked hard into her belly again, laughing.

Winded, the breath whooshed from Crescentsky's lungs. But she kept her forepaws up and shoving.

"Why are you telling the clan? Tell me! Why do you hate us? We were going to tell the clan *ourselves!"* She hissed into her sister's face.

"Just be still and *talk* to me," Crescentsky had just enough time to get the words out before Rowanpaw flung her off. She couldn't find any real purchase without her front claws. The tabby warrior skidded backward into some nettle stems, and as they brushed against her face she cowered away, spitting.

"No. You're going to be exposed *now*! You've always been-."

Rowanpaw trailed off as some swampgrass stems rustled above their heads. Both she-cats craned their necks as a cat stepped to the edge of the embankment.

The cat was obscured by a sheen of sideway-falling rain. They bunched their shoulders in order to jump down.

"Lagoonstripe!" Crescentsky realized who it was a moment later. She wrenched her paws up and out of the sucking mud.

The experienced Riverclan warrior dropped her prey. "I was just on my way back from collecting my catch. What is going on here?"

Both sisters had disheveled fur that was streaked with ruddy-brown mud. Some of it was being washed away by the steady downpour, but Crescentsky could feel a thick swathe caked along her belly. *And* a blobby clot of it stuck was behind one ear.

"You two look awful. Especially Crescentsky. Your eyes are practically glazed over."

Every cat keeps saying how horrid I look. But all I can think about is how I feel *it.* She blinked slowly and stepped away from Rowanpaw. That squabble had drained the last of her energy.

"Well... We were arguing-" the Riverclan warrior tried to explain, her chest heaving as she calmed down.

"NO! She's lying *again*," Rowanpaw interrupted, her voice high and indignant.

"And I found out why she lies so much."

Lagoonstripe's emerald eyes flattened with boredom. They nearly matched the thriving evergreen shrubs all around them.

"Enlighten me, then." It was clear that the silver tabby didn't believe her.

"Cheetah said that Crescentsky has no claws! And from how they were talking, Tinyflame doesn't either. There was also some 'other thing,' but Tinyflame cut Cheetah off before she could finish. They were trying to hide it, that's why."

"Why were you even *at* the medicine cat's den? Were you spying on us?" Crescentsky couldn't resist a growl.

"I was not!" Rowanpaw snapped indignantly. "I was trying to ask Tinyflame if she had seen Vixeneye in her Starclan dream or not. I want to know if our mother is still alive."

Crescentsky couldn't find an answer. She didn't even know if their mother deserved Starclan, considering how she had abandoned the clans and her kits of her own free will. *Who cares?*

When the pattering rain was coupled with only silence, Rowanpaw went on harshly.

"Does this mean she can't be a warrior?"

Lagoonstripe was patiently waiting for them to finish. Her eyes had grown round with confusion.

When it was clear that Rowanpaw was done speaking, she turned and looked over at Crescentsky, whiskers dripping.

"Is this all true? I never took you and Tinyflame as the imaginative type, Crescentsky. What is real and what is lies?"

"You'll see when I'm proven right! Just hold her down and look. She couldn't even scratch me when we fought," Rowanpaw snarled.

"No cat ever believes me-" she began fuming, but Lagoonstripe raised her tail for silence.

Crescentsky tried to stand up straight. Her tail was twitching uneasily.

Lagoonstripe stands beside Jadestar as the highest authority in camp right now. What will she say, as Riverclan's acting leader? Would she throw Crescentsky out?

She *thought* she knew her well enough to assume that she wouldn't, but this type of circumstance was unheard of.

"I need to hear it from Crescentsky herself. Tell me the truth."

Her paws were nearly shaking as her heart raced with anticipation. "I-well, it's true, yes. I don't have any claws. They were taken out when we were captured by that Twoleg just under a moon ago. Tinyflame and I have been hiding it since then..."

Crescentsky wanted to gauge Lagoonstripe's reaction in-between speaking, but a forced ache began to close up her throat. She had to say what she wanted to say, and fast.

"I'm sorry. Just *please* don't do anything to Tinyflame. Let her stay as she is. She said she's actually happy to fulfill such an important role. She said she never thought she was worthy of getting such a high position in the clan, especially without her claws. My sister thought she was doomed to the sidelines. She said she doesn't have the talent and the confidence, but she does! She said Starclan told

her that *she does!* So *don't* take that away from her!" Crescentsky's voice grew sharp and desperate.

"I-you can't throw us out. *You won't*!" Her tone hardened until the tabby warrior felt she would snarl in fury. But that wouldn't come out either, and so Crescentsky just ended in an awkward emotional choking sound.

"Rebellion won't help you now!" Rowanpaw snickered, but she hardly heard her. The Riverclan warrior was watching Lagoonstripe through apprehensive slitted eyes.

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[image]

"Crescentsky, stop freaking out! Calm down." Lagoonstripe sat down on the wet earth, extending a paw and setting it atop hers.

"We aren't going to throw you guys out for that. I mean, how much can I do about something that occurred a moon ago? And it wasn't as if you asked for such a thing to happen."

"But she's useless to the clan! She barely brings any prey back. And when she does it's not even hers. It's some other cat's prey that helped her to lie about feeding the clan," Rowanpaw jabbered.

"She's got other cats in on her lies. We have to do something before half the clan turns corrupt."

"She isn't lying about her hunting. It's sparse, but I've seen her catch prey, so she must've found some way to hunt.

And she fought against the wolves; Oh, wait-." Lagoonstripe angled her ears sharply.

"How did you manage that? It's far less believable though I'm sorry to say so, Crescentsky. Did you really try and defend the camp without claws? What *really* happened?" Her green eyes were sharp and clear, even through the haze of rain.

"Surely you can't climb trees now. So explain yourself."

The she-cat's voice softened. "It's okay if you and Tinyflame got your injuries running away, and fibbed to try and make yourselves look less cowardice. I mean, it's understandable. You wanted your warrior names..." Lagoonstripe trailed off.

Does she really think that little of us? Well I guess that's the only explanation, in her eyes.

Crescentsky's head hurt. She had really wanted to sleep for a while

before getting into all of this. And to say the least, her body felt like it had been dragged along a Thunderpath.

Her own heartbeat was echoing in the hind-leg that was torn. If she could curl upon the ground here and go to sleep, she would- without hesitation.

"It's not that. Uh no, I can't climb trees anymore." She answered one question while she struggled aimlessly to find the words for another.

There was no right way to say it. No way to soften the blow, so to speak.

"You see- I *did* fight against the wolves when they attacked Tinyflame. I tried to defend the camp walls. But we didn't climb a tree after that. Um, well..."

Above them, the bleary blue-gray sky was indistinguishable. Both she-cats had their ears pricked in waiting to hear what came next. Rowanpaw had a snide expression on her face, clearly pleased that she had begun to unravel Crescentsky's lies.

"You and Tinyflame against *three* wolves. Without claws?" Lagoonstripe sounded skeptical as ever.

Pain sang along the entirety of Crescentsky's flanks, reaching all the way down to her paws.

I need to... lay down.

"Still goes the question of how you are alive today. Even with some kind of miracle, it doesn't make sense. Please, Crescentsky. Trust me enough to tell me the truth. How'd you two get away?"

"Spit it out!" Rowanpaw sneered. "Or are you scared of what everyone will think of you now?"

Lagoonstripe gasped with fright. Her eyes flashed as her head twisted to look behind her.

It lept over the gully and down on top of them chest-first. It had

been following Lagoonstripe's scent-trail from deeper in the willow forest, done time and time again by wolves who'd come before it.

Crescentsky was still so enervate that she couldn't react as quickly as the two other cats. She didn't realize what was happening as fast as they did.

"Run! To the-" Lagoonstripe's shriek was cut off as the wolf bent and grabbed her head in-between its pulverizing jaws. It lifted her up and thrashed the she-cat back and forth, while Crescentsky stood there horrified.

Mere heartbeats later she was trying to switch into her wolf, shaking out her pelt so desperately that she stumbled sideways on her paws.

It won't work! It's not nightfall yet. It's not even sundown. Terror spazzed her nerves. Any trace of her previous lightheadedness had vanished, and a ghastly look was painted across her face.

What can I do?

Rowanpaw had already fled or climbed a tree. Which one, she didn't know. Lagoonstripe was getting torn apart right in front of her, wailing and screeching as her legs jerked about her.

"Lagoonstripe!" *I'll fight for my clan whether I'm a wolf or a cat!*

Crescentsky braced herself and stalked forward rapidly. She lept for the figure of grey fur best that she could, spitting and spinning with her pelt puffed out to three times its size.

This wolf wasn't as young as the last two had been. It didn't hesitate in letting go of Lagoonstripe and making a grab for her. Crescentsky felt fangs sink into the soft flesh around her belly as she was seized instead.

She twisted violently and flicked her hindpaws up and toward its muzzle. She knew that if she could dig those rear claws into its gums and lips hard enough, it would let go. She just had to *not die* first.

Lagoonstripe was attacking. Crescentsky had thought she was down. When the she-cat lept for the wolf's eyes and tore thin ribbon-strips into its cheek, it finally let Crescentsky go.

There were deep welts in her spine and belly now. Staggering, Crescentsky felt the blood running from her new wounds. Her chest swelled as she fought for breath.

"Go hide in the brush!" Lagoonstripe urged.
When Crescentsky caught sight of the warrior she nearly gasped and withdrew.

Lagoonstripe's entire head was covered in blood.

Both of them saw the bite forthcoming and lept back and out of range. It was a wonder that Lagoonstripe could see at all, but Crescentsky didn't get much of a chance to consider how she was managing.

The wolf's assailant snarling was loud. Ears pinned low, it weaved its head between them, looking at one or the other as if it couldn't decide which to finish first. Crescentsky bit the animal's stinking grey forepaw, sinking her teeth in as Lagoonstripe lept for its face.

The Riverclan she-cat paused, panting. She felt slow and uncoordinated. She could hardly fight with her hind-leg either hoisted up in a limp or dragging along the ground. Whenever she moved it, the sting of pain nearly made her bite her own tongue off.

"Crescentsky, I said *go*." Lagoonstripe spat between her assaults, her voice gurgling. Maybe with blood.

"Run!"

"Rrrrowr!" A cat's warning growl rolled over the gully edge just before four warriors streamed over it. Two of them took the path of running down the ridges sides, so that they surrounded the wolf on all angles.

Pretty soon it was hard to tell what part of the surging, struggling mass was cat and what part was wolf. Cats swarmed over the neck and face of the wolf. Cats clung onto sallow furry shoulders while

others targeted hind-limbs. Crescentsky heard the tearing sound when a chunk of Nighthowl's ear got caught between teeth.

Regardless of the familiar faces that had arrived to help, the warriors were still sustaining serious injuries. Crescentsky saw Quietdew's spine seized and ground into the earth, before she clawed herself free and sped away.

The grey-black animal showed teeth and snapped at warriors a few times, grabbing and ripping their flesh and fur, but not managing to land a killing blow with such a swarm of cats assailing.
Each time the wolf twisted to bite, another warrior ripped at it again.

Then it began advancing on her, Wolfpaw and Lagoonstripe, ignoring the other cats behind or beside it.

The wolf pushed them back and into a wall of bulrush stems. Patches of nettle grew on either side of them so that they were boxed in.

Lagoonstripe made to leap over the nettles. But just as her paws left the ground, her neck was gripped between strong jaws.

Crescentsky was sickened by what she saw next. She did the best she could, screeching and tearing with non-existent claws, showing teeth and snarling. Wolfpaw did the same.

But there was no point.

She knew the power of those teeth when they were aimed well. She'd felt it in her own jaws before. She had experimentally snapped the strongest of sticks inbetween those canines.

Crescentsky *knew* the terror they could bring. Especially unto a cat. She'd seen it before.

Eveningstar. Everfrost . Cloverpaw.

Her own neck was soaked in blood but it might as well be rain. It might as well be any other insignificant thing as she charged, her blows frail and incompetent.

Unable to do anything but strike out valiantly as she watched her mentor die.

The remaining warriors managed to chase off the mature wolf. All five had injuries, but all were determined to be survivable- as long as they sought the immediate treatment of a medicine cat.

Quietdew did point out that Crescentsky looked especially 'disheveled,' though.

"But you're still lucky," the grey-and-white warrior carried on unhelpfully. "You have thick fur that helped to cushion your injuries. It feels like my spine nearly got split in two."

"She's had that one injury for a while now, though. Hasn't she? And it's not healing." Nighthowl asked.

"Tinyflame has hardly had time to treat it, remember. She only just became Riverclan's medicine cat." Someone else commented.

"Well, she looks out of it. She's shivering. Maybe she has a fever from that infected wound," said Nighthowl.

"Or maybe it's just grief."

"It's probably both." Wolfpaw summed up.

Crescentsky hardly heard them, and so she didn't bother acknowledging any of it. Some unseen force between the back of her skull and her forehead was grinding and twisting, so that it hurt to even think.

Apart from the gaping wounds along the ridge of her back, Quietdew's other injuries included a mangled foreleg. The gash was twisting and long, and wrapped all the way from her dewclaw up to her elbow. She held it out stiffly, grimacing.

"Well if you'd soon get up, I'd like to make it back to camp to get

these wounds looked at."

Cheetah was crouched beside Crescentsky in quiet solace. She had arrived just before the very end of the attack, and asked Lagoonstripe permission if she could join in.

But Lagoonstripe hadn't been able to answer at that time. Because she was slumped over inside of the tall stinging nettles, bleeding her life away underneath a cool greenleaf rain. They'd pulled her out after the ambush.

Crescentsky scooted forward and leaned over to whisper into the she-cat's ear; quietly enough that Quietdew couldn't hear.

"Lagoonstripe. I'm so sorry that I never told you the truth. Starclan gave me a gift, but not at a time where I could use it to protect you. *That's* how I defended the camp walls. That's how Tinyflame and I survived."

Does it even matter what I say now? Not really. She bit back a wail.

It doesn't even count if she's already dead!

As she crouched in front of the she-cat, Crescentsky could detect no traces of life. She shivered.

"Come *on*, Crescentsky. You know we have to get her body back to camp before sundown." Quietdew urged again.

Sundown. If only the wolf had waited until then or after to come. Then I could've saved you.

I don't care what it would've cost. Let Rowanpaw and the rest of the clan see it happen. I wouldn't have cared.

We waited too long, she realized just then. It felt like a blow from a rabbit had thumped against her chest.

This wouldn't have happened if we had told the clan sooner. Rowanpaw wouldn't have ran off to snitch. And Lagoonstripe would've been back to camp by then. Before-. She swallowed, but her throat still felt closed up.

Before that wolf came.

"Crescentsky."

Cheetah raised her head, her yellow eyes narrowed in irritation. "Let her grieve for Lagoonstripe!"

"That wolf could come back," Quietdew went on matter-of-factly. "Or other ones."

Crescentsky couldn't stop the thoughts from flowing, now. Grief was spilling out of her. Was she doomed to never see a mentor grow old?

"Hey. It's alright." The green-eyed silver tabby whispered back suddenly, in a shuddering quiet breath.

Crescentsky gasped aloud, silencing all of the cats around her. *Lagoonstripe is alive..!*

"You could have trusted me. I always wanted that trust from you." Lagoonstripe paused for so long that Crescentsky nearly wept again.

"I always wanted you to achieve all your dreams, because I knew that your determination could take you there. You're the light of Riverclan now, Crescentsky. You have been for awhile."

Crescentsky shook her head hopelessly as her voice cracked. "Why are you making this about me? We need to get you to the medicine cat's den. We need to-."

"What's she saying? I thought she was dead."

Quietdew broke into their conversation, but her son Emberfawn snapped, "Mother! Are you seriously so used to death that you've lost all sense of manners and respect? Lagoonstripe is-" their voices faded into the background as Quietdew was led away.

Lagoonstripe's striped silver legs were stretched out and still beside her. She laid with one side of her red face looking up toward the sky.

"I knew I couldn't have kits when the clans were in such a predicament. To say the least." The she-cat wheezed.

"Plus, no toms ever returned my interests in being their mate."

"But-..." Crescentsky began, her eyes fluttering as she leaned back indignantly.

This is random. Why say this now? Plus, Lagoonstripe is definitely a head-turning warrior to any *tom!* (Around her age.)

"Why wouldn't they? You're-" Crescentsky was cut off again.

"Listen to me. None of that matters now. Know that I always wanted what's best for you. You were like a daughter to me. A daughter that I could never kit or call my own; but one that I just— I, just...." she was forced to pause in her grappling breath, which had grown more ragged and desperate.

"One that I was proud of. I know that you'll save Riverclan. I'm only sorry I can't stay to help you along the way, and witness you grow up some more."

Crescentsky could barely make out her face for the blood pulsing from it. She couldn't see the wound site, and she didn't think she wanted to. She licked Lagoonstripe's cheek and sobbed.

"I should've told you this before, Crescentsky. But trust other cats. *Please*. Trust the other cats." Lagoonstripe went on, her voice clipped and painful.

"Tell them the truth.

I suppose I'll be hearing about this Starclan gift-." Her flickering green eyes focused on something behind Crescentsky. The Riverclan warrior quickly glanced over her shoulder, but nothing was there.

"After we go to Starclan."

Cheetah's touch couldn't reach Crescentsky any longer. And she couldn't hear anything else, as if her ears were stuffed with thistledown.

The tabby she-cat's eyes shimmered as she stared at her previous mentor's face, drowned in red.

Lagoonstripe isn't talking to me anymore.

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[image] [image] [image][image]

It had been decided that they would not send some cat after Tinyflame for help. It would only take longer trying to fetch her in the pouring rain and swathe of fog.

So they lifted Lagoonstripe onto the most able-bodied warriors shoulders, then carried her slowly back to the medicine cat's den.

There was nothing anyone could do. Tinyflame could not resurrect the dead.

When Crescentsky exited the medicine cat's den some time later alongside Jadestar, Quietdew and Tinyflame, she was met with distressing calls.

"Cats are being preyed upon before sunset more often now. We need to make sure that no one splits up on patrols from now on. No matter what!" Pepperpelt sounded uneasy.

"We needed Lagoonstripe! Without her there's even less hope!"

"So she's really dead now?" Velvetpaw asked.

"I thought Lagoonstripe would've become leader, once Starclan had given us some real answers and led us to a new territory..."

"Who will assign the patrols now?"

"It'll be alright." Crescentsky tried to gather herself. Then she lifted her muzzle and began to reassure them.

"We can figure this out.

We might not have all of the answers right now, but Alpinefog can assign patrols until further notice."

She tried to keep her paws from buckling beneath her. The

inflammation raging in the she-cat's hindleg made her grit her teeth in turmoil.

Just hold it together a little while longer, Crescentsky.

"Alpinefog was already helping arrange the clan duties before."

"Where is he?" Tinyflame asked, glancing over the crowd.

"He's on a border-marking patrol with Racoonstripe and Trufflefur," some cat answered. "They're by the Windclan border."

"In this rain?" Pepperpelt asked.

"Cats still have to patrol and hunt, mom!" Oatpaw rebuked.

"If you ask me, we should cut out the border patrols." Jadestar interluded. Crescentsky's forehead was pounding, as the same old sharp pain kept digging into her haunch.

"And now we pray that the wolf didn't cross their path in its retreat. You should've chased it past Riverclan's scent-lines. There was a whole team of warriors, so what stopped you?" Sootface bellowed.

"We were more focused on protecting Lagoonstripe's body. You know, from the wolf who wanted to *eat her!*" Crescentsky snapped.

Cheetah touched noses with her and laid her tail across Crescentsky's, looking genuinely mournful.

"I'm really sorry about Lagoonstripe, Crescentsky. She was a great mentor to me as well, even if not officially." Her muzzle was pulled down in a melancholy frown.

A pitiful "Thanks," was all she could muster. Cheetah pressed her flank against her friend's.

If it was okay, then I'd say it was.

But it isn't. So I'll just say nothing right now.

Her vision swam just then, and wouldn't fully focus.

I'm too tired for this. Or ill, I guess. Probably both. The tabby-and-white warrior stayed leaning against Cheetah for support and reassurance.

She didn't know if it was her wounds troubling her anymore, the pure exhaustion, or the affliction of Lagoonstripe's loss. It could be *all* of it.

Tinyflame came to join them just then, wrapping her tail around the two and gazing across camp through the hazy pattering rain. It was finally dwindling down towards a drizzle.

"Sister, I need to treat your wounds and give you a poppy seed," her littermate muttered softly. "We can worry about... Other things, later."

"I'll bring you some prey when you wake up!" Cheetah mewed, more lively.

Emberfawn came to sit beside Cheetah, and Oatpaw followed as well. And eventually Rainstrike scooted in beside her and Tinyflame, so that their six-cat huddle was like a tiny solace of warmth from the sorrow.

Crescentsky didn't move from that spot just yet, despite being utterly drained. She was getting something that she couldn't get from curling up in a nest alone. This was some other kind of relief.

"I liked Lagoonstripe." Oatpaw said in a meek tone. It was the opposite of his usual demeanor.

"She stood up for Rainstrike and me against Jadestar, even though she had no real reason to. She wasn't our clan or kin," he finished.

"I understand what he's trying to say," Cheetah put in.

I do too, thought Crescentsky. She dropped to her belly, too exhausted to stand any longer.

"Lagoonstripe was one of the best Riverclan warriors I've ever met. She was the model of what a Riverclan warrior should be, I think. And you're following in her pawsteps already, Crescentsky."

Rainstrike aimed the words around Tinyflame's shoulder at her. She sounded a little awkward as she said it, but her voice remained mostly steady throughout.

Quietdew spoke up and interrupted any response that Crescentsky might've had. Her loud voice was aimed at anyone who was listening.

"Alpinefog is going to be so upset when he gets back... He really cared about his sister. They always worked together to run the clan, and he gained most of his confidence from her. There's no other kin of his left in the clans."

Some of the cats tossed Quietdew a disdainful glance.

The gray-and-white warrior sat down next to her son. A sticky layer of cobweb and herb-mixture was fastened across the wounds on her foreleg and back.

Crescentsky and the other clan cats waited in conjoined silence for several long heartbeats. No one seemed to want to say more.

Lagoonstripe said 'After we go to Starclan' before she died.

I think her soul left her body soon after that. Mourning tore at her heart.

Oatpaw had weaved the silver she-cat a fresh nest just yesterday. And Lagoonstripe had said she planned to start implementing battle training that was focused on cat-and-wolf combat again this morning, too. (since more warriors had arrived on Riverclan's land in the form of Shadowclan loners.)

Ironic as it was, Crescentsky had been excited to join in after she was healed. If she ever *did* heal.

Plus, her mind had explored the option of training with her clanmates in the body of her wolf. If they could ever trust her as much...

It wasn't *just* those things that were utterly ruined now, though. Lagoonstripe's perch was still lying somewhere out there in the

forest. And there might've been hope for her to have a mate and kits one day, like she'd wanted. If only the she-cat had lived long enough to find one...

None of that matters now. But it should, Crescentsky thought as she huddled beside her friends and littermate.

"Well, I'm going to try my best at treating your wounds now. You can't just lie there bleeding out. Some of the bite marks on your back look-."

"I'm telling you, Racoonstripe." A grovely voice spoke up from beyond the camp walls. "You need to do more in the way of being alert on patrol. It's not exactly a carefree early leaf-fall right now."

The entrance shivered as three toms made their way through it. Rowanpaw trailed after them, her eyes bright and her tail bushy.

Crescentsky narrowed her eyes at the she-cat.

Great Starclan, I actually forgot about her.

But now isn't the time to do some big reveal. There's been another death in Riverclan.

So I expect she'll keep her mouth shut. And yet; Crescentsky could hardly put it past a cat like her.

"Think of it this way; we're sharing a territory with them. They could show up at any m-..." Alpinefog leaned down abruptly with his nostrils flaring. He straightened after seeing the droplets of blood on the grass.

"Some cat is injured." His ears twitched. "The wolves? Not in the middle of the day again!"

"Remember how I said I needed to tell you something important? You wouldn't listen because you were too busy lecturing Racoonstripe."

The voice was Rowanpaw's. But as soon as she'd spoken, the russet-furred apprentice was interrupted and ignored.

Alpinefog gasped as soon as some cat told him. Then he raced into the medicine cat's den, leaving Racconstripe, Trufflefur and Rowanpaw standing there.

Crescentsky shivered between Cheetah and Rainstrike. The dwindling rain that fell all around them was making their fur sodden, but that wasn't what made her shake. She felt that things couldn't possibly get anymore dreadful.

And underneath it all was the same pressing, gnawing, *throbbing* white-hot agony that threatened to engulf all of her senses.

There was no getting used to it. It felt like some cat had paws wrapped around her throat, and her head and her chest- tugging and clawing. Her ears went flat with pain.

"Alpinefog!" Rowanpaw called when her mentor slipped out of the den.

"Say what you need to say and then put a fish in it, Rowanpaw...!" The gray mentor snapped.

"My sister is *dead.* She was the last thing holding this clan together." He boomed with his ears pinned back, the anguish clear on his face.

"Well, that doesn't change the fact that I have something to say. And my name isn't Rowanpaw anymore.

I named myself Rowanfrost, no thanks to you."

Rowanfrost lifted a forepaw before she swiveled, taking a step closer to the main throng of gathered cats.

"Since every cat is already here, Riverclan needs to know something. In fact *every* clan does- since a lot of you seem to worship the very ground that Crescentsky stalks upon." Her gaze slid over to Oatpaw and Rainstrike, who were sitting close beside the tabby she-cat. The pale yellow tom and grey she-cat pricked their ears.

"What are you talking about?" Sootface raised his voice over the numerous growls of annoyance.

"I'm talking about the fact that Crescentsky and Tinyflame are *liars!* They've been lying to us all this time, about things that we can't even begin to imagine."

She turned her smug, challenging gaze on Crescentsky, who flattened her ears and met all of the stares that fell upon her.

"They've faked escaping the wolves time and time again. They've lied about hunting and lied about their warriors vigil. They probably feigned going to the Moonpool and meeting with Starclan as well. And you want to know why?

It's because *they* don't have any claws!"

Heat flushed her pelt and set it alight. Crescentsky jumped to her paws, tail bushed out like a pinecone.

"Wait!" She hissed, while so many of them looked at her incredulously.

"I'll tell you the truth. I'll tell you how everything really happened."

THE END 🌙

Wait to see the scene following this one in "ROWANFROST'S JEALOUSY"

Trufflefur's Bonus Chapters are out now. Feel free to read in your own time

About Book 2: *Rowanfrost's Jealousy (name in-workshop)*
-*(*on hold for *Lethal Desire* (Jadestar's POV) *mini-story completion*)

What to expect in Book 2:

-the complexities of why Vixeneye left her kits behind (Rowankit Tinykit &Crescentkit)

-parts of Rowanfrost's kithood and why she is the way she is

-a resolution to Jadestar and Sootface, regarding the negativity and

oppositions they bring

-focus on things that were not so included in Carnage Moon like motherhood, mate dynamics, and kin/family bonds

-more side and supporting characters having their moment to shine and become more developed (this goes with the entire rest of the series)

Rowanfrost Moodboard by lavenderfrost990

Cheetah's Moodboard by the same person

Note:) I want to say that I know Carnage Moon is not the best, especially pacing wise. But that it was my first step into warriors fanfiction writing. Thank you for giving this book a chance. (I hope to only improve from here on out!) And for all of your kind&insightful comments, I am grateful

Thank you sincerely to everyone, be it silent readers or avid commenters. I appreciate you.

Trufflefur's Choice-Bonus Chapter

[image] [image]

In soft snow beside some frosty glistening undergrowth, a lithe young tom stood still. His shoulders were hunched as he waited, breath cloudy in the windless air.

"Trufflepaw. You coming?"

Trufflepaw looked back. Prey dangled from his jaws.

The two toms were headed for a snowy hollow half a day's walk outside Thunderclan territory. The rest of their clanmates waited at the top of a crest, already laden with prey the that they would share before they lost sight of the clan territories.

"We need to regroup and reach that hollow before sundown. It's our safest chance at avoiding the wolves tonight."

He knew that. *It's just...* He didn't *want* to.

Trufflepaw was leaving all he loved back there, behind those fox-cursed brambles at the bottom of a snow-covered slope. The ones with the thorns wider than a cat's paw.

Behind the overgrown weeds and interlocking ivy vines that tripped up your steps anytime you weren't looking. Behind even the holly bushes and sour-scented dandelions in Greenleaf; that he loved to hate and hated to love.

"Trufflepaw," the voice repeated ever-so patiently.

He stayed waiting for some sort of sign. Something to tell him to turn back. Ignoring his clan leader.

No cat's call rang out from the wide-trunked oak and spruce trees. The wind didn't lift his fur in the opposite direction, tugging him

back. Like he wanted it to.

I have to decide. This is my last chance.

And Trufflepaw? He opened his jaws, and he did decide. Even though he had already decided what felt like *six* times before this.

I was so sure. But this is.. I can't- I just can't!

He'd tried to remain placid like Antlerstar was, really he had. But this time his voice came out high and pitiful.

"I don't think I can do what's best for my clan. Not here. Not now."

"You said you made up your mind. She told you to leave this territory for her, so you could survive. Squirrelchase *wants* you to-"

"I know what she wants!" Trufflepaw interjected, ashamed. Flattening his ears and turning away.

"I just can't do it, alright? I'm not like *you*." He spoke out toward Thunderclan's sparkling forest, so that he wasn't shoving his emotions right into his leader's face.

"You can leave your kin behind for the betterment of Thunderclan, but *I* can't*!"*

The crisp air went silent for a few moments. Thunderclan's leader let his whiskers fall until they nearly brushed the earth.

"Trufflepaw, trust me when I say I knew the weight of what we were asking you.

No cat is in the right or wrong for making a decision such as mine or yours today." The leader straightened from his bow.

Trufflepaw was quieted once again by Antlerstar's ability to stay composed.

He's always so calm about everything. The apprentice sighed so deeply that his shoulders fell.

I know *Antlerstar cares about his kin. Maybe I'm just angry that I can't do what he does yet. Staying strong no matter what... And putting Thunderclan above everything else.*

Does that make me less of a clan cat? I'd say it does. But Trufflepaw felt too insecure to ask his leader such a thing, him of all cats.

Even though Antlerstar wasn't an *old* leader. Their clan had been through turmoil before him. But the stoic tom had learned to fill the role quickly and efficiently, providing solid leadership for Thunderclan in these times of strife.

And I just snapped at him... I can't ever stay calm. I can't ever control my emotions. Not about things like this.

It's just like all the other times- when I cried into Garlicpaw's fur.

Each time, Garlicpaw eventually pushed him off, saying 'Chill, bro. You're always too sensitive. You gotta learn how to control your emotions, at least on the outside.' Maybe he was right.

Trufflepaw was unaware that he was lost in thought in front of the Thunderclan leader. Until Antlerstar cleared his throat, that is.

"If you're sure that you want to stay, I'll leave you now. I can't bear to say goodbye to them again." Trufflepaw saw emotion shining in the leader's eyes, although his voice was strong.

"Take your catch with you. I know we already left a fresh-kill pile for the injured cats, but you can always bury it in the snow to preserve it.

May Starclan light your path and the paths of all that you pad beside." Antlerstar dipped his head again, this time in farewell.

"Wait!" Trufflepaw called out after briefly hesitating, but the broad-shouldered tom was already bounding away.

I didn't say goodbye to Garlicpaw...

Garlicpaw was his best friend. More like kin, really. It felt like they had survived everything together. They'd seen their Clanmates and

families struck down by the wolves practically since they'd both opened their eyes. And they'd stuck closer because of it.

Garlicpaw had been a huge piece of Trufflepaw's world for more than half his life. Just like Squirrelchase. And it felt like betrayal not to say anything to him. To just leave that all in the air.

Even if the explanation of why he'd chosen to stay came from Antlerstar, it felt... Wrong. Wrong that he'd chosen his kin over his best friend and his clan.

And they were pretty close to getting their warrior names together. Until Trufflepaw had gone and wrecked it, that is.

I destroyed my dreams and part of Garlicpaw's, too.

Crestfallen, Trufflepaw decided that it would only hurt his friend more to see him go. Garlicpaw was pretty understanding on a front, since he never liked to show emotions or weakness in front of other cats. So really, Trufflepaw could expect a guarded response.

But he'd be able to see through it, of course. And then it would wreck him all the worse for what he'd done. Claws latched into his heart, tugging him one way and then the other. His thoughts were at war.

Maybe a snake was winding around his throat. Maybe vines were growing out of his heart, wrapping around his paws and muzzle. That's what it felt like, but every time Trufflepaw looked- nothing was there.

He needed to get away from this feeling. And there was one way he knew how. One thing that *always* brought relief from it.

Trufflepaw turned on his heels and raced into the forest. Giant sycamore trees towered high above his head. The weak winter sunshine that slanted through was greenish-gray and cold.

Just like the snow beneath his pads. Just like the wind he breathed in and out. Just like that hollow feeling in his heart.

It was bleeding again, the stubborn thing. It never stopped, really.

Not until he was right in front of the forepaws of the cat that he loved. Trufflepaw barged through the forest, tearing his fur running too close to bramble bushes.

He pulled up short when he finally made it to the end of the gorse tunnel.

"Mother!"

He barreled through the snow. Trufflepaw sobbed, bounding down the sloping path that led into Thunderclan camp.

"Squirrelchase! *Mom!* I came back for you and Rainbowkit. I came... back."

He stopped as two cats hobbled out of the medicine cat's den entrance. One halted partway through, so that her haunches and outstretched tail were swallowed in dismal blue shadow.

Littlecherry had greencough. Fireflyfur and Cirruspelt had tried and failed to treat it so far. Quick-tempered Cirruspelt had chosen to stay behind and help the remaining warriors, but Trufflepaw didn't see her around.

"Littlecherry and Flamewind, are you feeling better?" Trufflepaw held fast to his manners, dipping his head to his clanmates politely.

Even though Thunderclan had only been gone since early sunrise. Even though, 'are you feeling better?' was a inane question. Even though it his mother he was truly worried about.

"Always such a polite lad," Flamewind declared.

"We've been better, sweetheart. But for now, we're alright." Littlecherry's voice quavered.

"Yes. I'm-..." Flamewind trailed off with a wheeze. They waited for him to respond for so long, that Trufflepaw wondered for a second if his heart had stopped beating altogether.

"I'm okay, I guess."

"I'm so sorry. I can help you guys! I'm back now. I can make you fresh nests and help Cirruspelt out." The brown tom's heart swelled with trepidation.

"So where's Squirrelchase?" He asked, searching Littlecherry's gaze.

Trufflefur's Choice-Bonus Chapter

[image] [image]

"Don't worry, dear. They're inside the den. And Cirruspelt is out gathering herbs. I told him not to go by himself, but he insisted."

"Well..." Flamewind trailed off.

"What?" said Trufflepaw.

"You know Squirrelchase wouldn't *usually* be sleeping at sunhigh."

"I know that," Littlecherry snapped. "But she's still healing. She'll start being more active as soon as she gets her strength back!"

Alarm flared inside Trufflepaw. He nearly bounded off, leaving them standing there.

Has she gotten worse already? Please don't take her, Starclan! He pleaded in silent prayer.

"Try to go calmly, now." Flamewind, a gravely injured Thunderclan warrior, weakly stretched out his paw.

"You don't want to scare her if it's close to her final moments. But Trufflepaw, you're very brave for coming back," the tom murmured.

Trufflepaw saw bite holes on Flamewind's flanks and between his ribs and as he stepped around the warrior. One of his eyes was also slashed open, grotesquely pulverized and weeping. As Flamewind breathed in and out, a painful-sounding rasp from his throat accompanied his chest falls. Trufflepaw grimaced.

"It would do you well not to look at Flamewind's eye for too long," Littlecherry reminded him.

"Yeah." He nodded, glancing away.

Cirruspelt had said that Flamewind had a punctured lung. So he couldn't hunt or run, or climb a tree without overexerting himself.

That's why he'd been left behind with the others. Instead of leaving to find new lands with Antlerstar.

In many ways, Trufflepaw could understand why Antlerstar had done what he'd done. Cats were dying here.

If you stayed, the chance of losing your life was more than the chance of keeping it. Especially if you'd been around for the initial bought of whitecough, and then rampant greencough.

As if his clan being killed off by the wolves wasn't enough.

"We'll come with you."

That was the last thing the young tom heard before the darkness inside the den swallowed him up.

Trufflepaw's tail-tip trailed the earth, and the stuffiness harrowed in on him all too soon. He could taste the despair that tainted the air. It almost turned it red.

Trufflepaw leaned over Squirrelchase, his mother. Rainbowkit was curled in a ball beside her. You could tell from the overpowering sickly scent that both of them were ill.

Squirrelchase's foster kit had whitecough. His chest rose and fell with each fitful breath.

Rainbowkit's birth mother had been killed by a wolf.

And now this.

Squirrelchase's ears were flattened to the side, as if she were uncomfortable. She pulled Rainbowkit closer in her sleep.

He could see the yellow-white pus of an infected wound peeking between the herbs slathering her injury.

A wolf did this to her. He pictured their undulating gums under the

moonlight. Their hot, sour breath that smelled like iron and carrion.

The sound of bone snapping between their falcate fangs rang in his ears. The sound of gnashing teeth as a clanmate's flesh was stripped from their fallen bodies. His hackles rose.

Trufflepaw's breath fell upon Squirrelchase's ear, and she stirred.

"Trufflepaw." She reached out with a paw. "My son," she muttered.

Squirrelchase tried to lift her head, but her neck stayed slouched to the side. Her head wobbled as she struggled to focus her gaze.

"I'm sorry. I know you told me to stay with Thunderclan."

"Come closer. Please listen," Squirrelchase rasped. Her voice sounded like nothing more than a fleeting whistle of air.

Trufflepaw obeyed and stooped closer.

"You are a lover, not a fighter."

Yeah, I know. And I've failed my clan for it.

I'm going to lose her after this talk, aren't I? That's why she's telling me to listen. His eyes stung.

As well as Garlicpaw. As well as the whole of Thunderclan!

"What did I even gain from coming back if you're just going to die?" He sobbed.

Trufflepaw knew he looked pathetic. And the entire time, he hated it.

He hated that Antlerstar and Garlicpaw could be so composed in the face of leaving their kin or clanmates behind. And he couldn't. It was impossible!

It wasn't that he wanted to *never* feel negative emotions- He just didn't want those emotions to swallow him up like this. He couldn't stop shaking, and he *couldn't* stop to listen. Even if his own dying

kin was telling him to!

Please don't take her yet, Starclan! Just a few more moons, please! He begged while gasping for more air. Shaking and looking a fool, just like Garlicpaw probably thought of him.

Squirrelchase grabbed his cheek with a paw and steadied him.

"My brave, beautiful son. Who stayed back for me. Who turned away from a brighter future in order to keep helping us..."

Her eyes became fleeting for a second, as if she were thinking about what she wanted to say next.

"You should have went with our clan. But I won't scold you for staying. I know why you didn't," Squirrelchase went on softly. Her eyes were shimmering with emotion as well.

"You love your kin, Trufflepaw. You put your love for other cats above your clan."

"And that is not wrong in the act of such a noble deed," Flamewind rasped his agreement with a sad smile.

Trufflepaw had forgotten they were there.

"And Trufflepaw? Thank you for coming back and helping with the hunting." Littlecherry said in her old quavering tone gratefully.

Trufflepaw hadn't offered to hunt for them yet, but he knew that the elder was entitled to that. He was the youngest of them, after all; and had no life-threatening injuries or ailments himself.

"It's nothing, Littlecherry. But what can we do? I can't lose her."

Inside the medicine cat's den, there wasn't enough body heat to keep his mother and Rainbowkit warm unless they were brushing up against one another. His voice shook slightly as he nestled into his mother's neck-fur like when he was a kit.

Trufflepaw sort of *did* feel like a kit in doing so, but he couldn't feel any sort of qualms to care- even in front of his two watching

clanmates.

"Cirruspelt will do his best. But.. there's no promises for any of us."

Trufflepaw bit back a sob against his mother's soft fur. This morning and yesterday had been an emotional blur. He remembered thinking he was going to leave with his clan all morning.

But I couldn't do it... He hugged his mother tighter, and she pulled him closer with her tail, wincing.

Squirrelchase inhaled despairingly, attempting to stand and swaying on her paws.

"I have to give my son his warrior name before I die. Whether that be tonight or tomorrow, no cat knows so I must... do it now. Because he deserves it."

Trufflepaw slid from his mother's bony flanks, shocked. Rainbowkit mewled indignantly. It sounded more like a feeble squeak. Trufflepaw grabbed him.

"But I'm sure Cirruspelt can save you! He's a great medicine cat. I'd rather wait for my warrior name." Trufflepaw protested while his other two clanmates sorrowfully avoided his gaze.

Flamewind and Littlecherry rushed around his mother to support her. Their breaths intertwined in the dark, frigid air.

"Plus it's still a moon and a half away, remember?" He didn't want his warrior name if it meant his mother died.

"He leads with his heart more than his head," Flamewind murmured. "And there ain't a darn thing wrong with that."

"Trufflepaw, this is your last chance to get your warrior name. Even if it's not.... In the usual circumstances." Squirrelchase paused for breath.

"I suspect that I'm going to die either way, and very soon. But to me it's okay. I just want you to live on and share all the love that you have with another cat one day. Find more friends or a mate, and

put all that yearning into something that's important to you. Wherever you go-..." she trailed off.

That much talking had taken the breath from his mother's lungs. She recuperated with her jaws slightly parted for air, shoulders slumped.

Trufflepaw awkwardly flattened his ears. He hated seeing his mother standing there thin as a skeleton. It *hurt*.

I can't be excited for my warrior name like this.

Why did the world have to take her so soon?

This can't be happening. I still haven't accepted it.

Is that even a possible thing?

"Starclan.

I, Squirrelchase, call upon my ancestors to look down upon this apprentice. He's trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn."

Littlecherry licked his mother's cheek. Somehow she looked more lively and healthy than Squirrelchase did now. And she was an *elder*- with greencough.

"Trufflepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend the cats you love and cherish, even at the cost of your life?"

Squirrelchase looked proud as she looked expectantly over at her son.

"I... do."

"Then I name you Trufflefur." Flamewind and Littlecherry purred in agreement.

"Why didn't you name him Truffleheart, though?" Flamewind asked meekly.

"Or Trufflepond, since his loyalty runs deep." Said Littlecherry.

"I wondered whether to put heart with his name or not. But either way it wouldn't matter."

Squirrelchase's eyes were shimmering like they used to now.

"Yours will surely shine through your fur more than enough for any other to see it."

Trufflefur bounded forward, carrying Rainbowkit by the scruff until he was purring beside his mother.

But then emotion seized his entire being, choking him up and dropping him into a pit of despair.

Please don't die. Not Squirrelchase. It's the only thing I'll ever ask for, ever *again!*

But the young tom was too scared to say it out loud.

Not long after came the thoughts of Garlicpaw.

I hope that by some crazy chance we'll cross the same skies again one day. Even if only in Starclan.

I could try to explain what happened, and we could tell each other our warrior names.

❍ 2 MOONS LATER ❍

"I've finished eating. You ready to go?" Cirruspelt asked. He had two neatly-wrapped herb bundles wrapped up in front of his paws.

"I already told you," Trufflefur responded. "I'm not coming."

"Well, suit yourself." The calico medicine cat shrugged. His breath clouded the frosty air.

"I can't waste anymore time. I'd like to set out while the weather's still clear. May Starclan light your path, Trufflefur."

Cirruspelt picked up his herb bundles and scurried off, slipping through the exit tunnel. He was heading for the sunlit rise that Thunderclan had crossed.

Trufflefur quickly washed his paws and tidied up the fresh-kill pile. There was some uneaten prey bones lying around.

Cirruspelt was leaving because his job was done. He didn't have anymore injured cats to care for. They were all dead.

Instead, the medicine cat's future was with Thunderclan now. Beyond the horizon.

Trufflefur's wasn't.

The tom slipped out of camp and stalked toward Squirrechase and Rainbowkit's graves.
Flamewind had been the first to go. Then, Squirrelchase.

Littlecherry and Rainbowkit had passed close together; during a blizzard, after that.

Trufflefur laid down carefully just along the edge of Squirrelchase's grave. He dipped his head low, until it was almost brushing the frozen, overturned earth.

This is where he felt closest to her spirit. This is where, if he stood still for long enough, he thought he could hear his mother's voice whispering to him. He could almost feel her fur.

"Leave. Follow Thunderclan."

A soft mew lingered on the wind. But only when his head was bowed and he wasn't looking.

"You can't stay here for us, Trufflefur." Another, smaller voice added.

But he couldn't leave. He *couldn't* leave a cat that he cared about. Even if they were dead.

Even when the wolves came and chased him away from their

graves, sniffing along the earth but finding it too frozen for the effort it was worth to dig up.

He stayed watching from the trees. Then he climbed back down after they'd left.

He kept coming there almost every day. Waiting for more of the voices.

But... they had long since went away.

He waited until the snow melted and Greenleaf brought with it the soft twittering of bird-song. Until fresh growth budded and unfurled, and fat, juicy prey began running between the oak trees again.

Wolves came more often now, particularly at night. Trufflefur learned how to keep his eyes and ears open. He stayed always within a fox-length of at least one sturdy tree. Always vigilant. Always checking the wind.

But one day, while he was finding his footing high up in a beech tree canopy near his mother's grave, something new happened.

Something different.

A blue-gray she-cat and her kin walked into the woods.

_____

A/N: Thought-Provoking Questions:

Q: Did Trufflefur betray his clan by staying?

Q: What do you think about Trufflefur's choice to turn back?

Q: If you found Trufflefur relatable to yourself;
in what way? Do you like him more now?

Q: Am I supposed to bold the word 'Greencough' or 'Leaf-Bare'?
Genuine question lol